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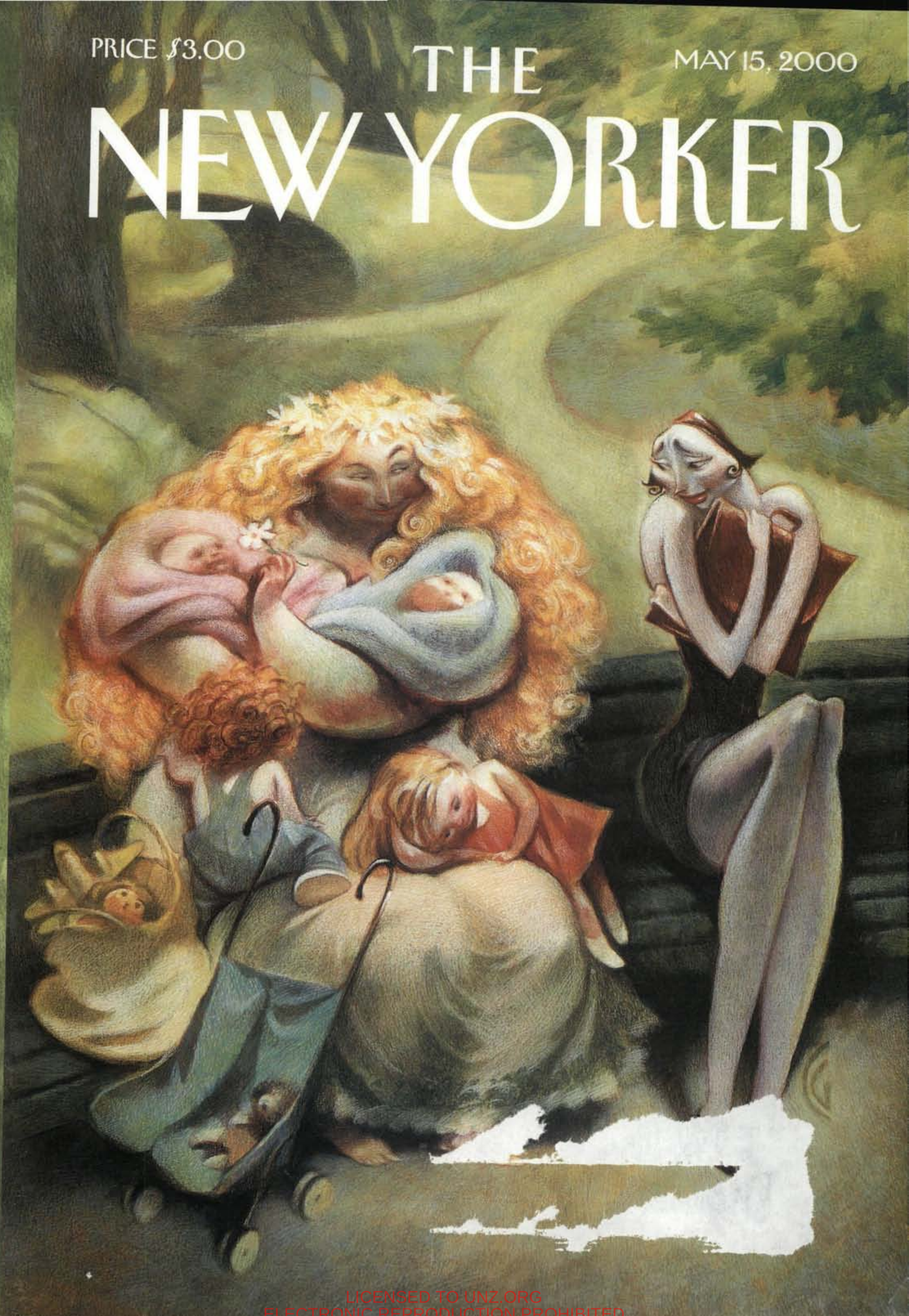
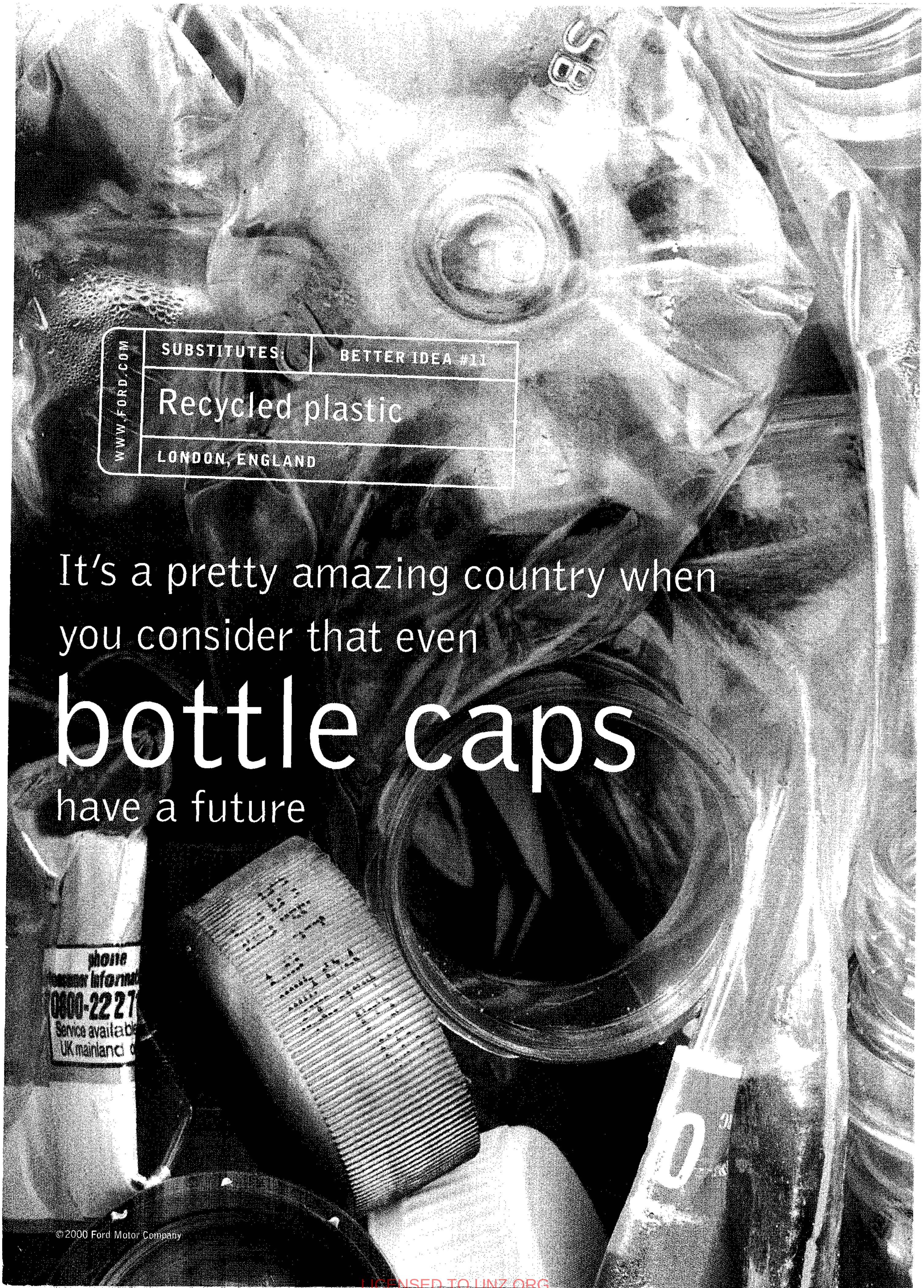
THE NEW YORKER

MAY 15, 2000

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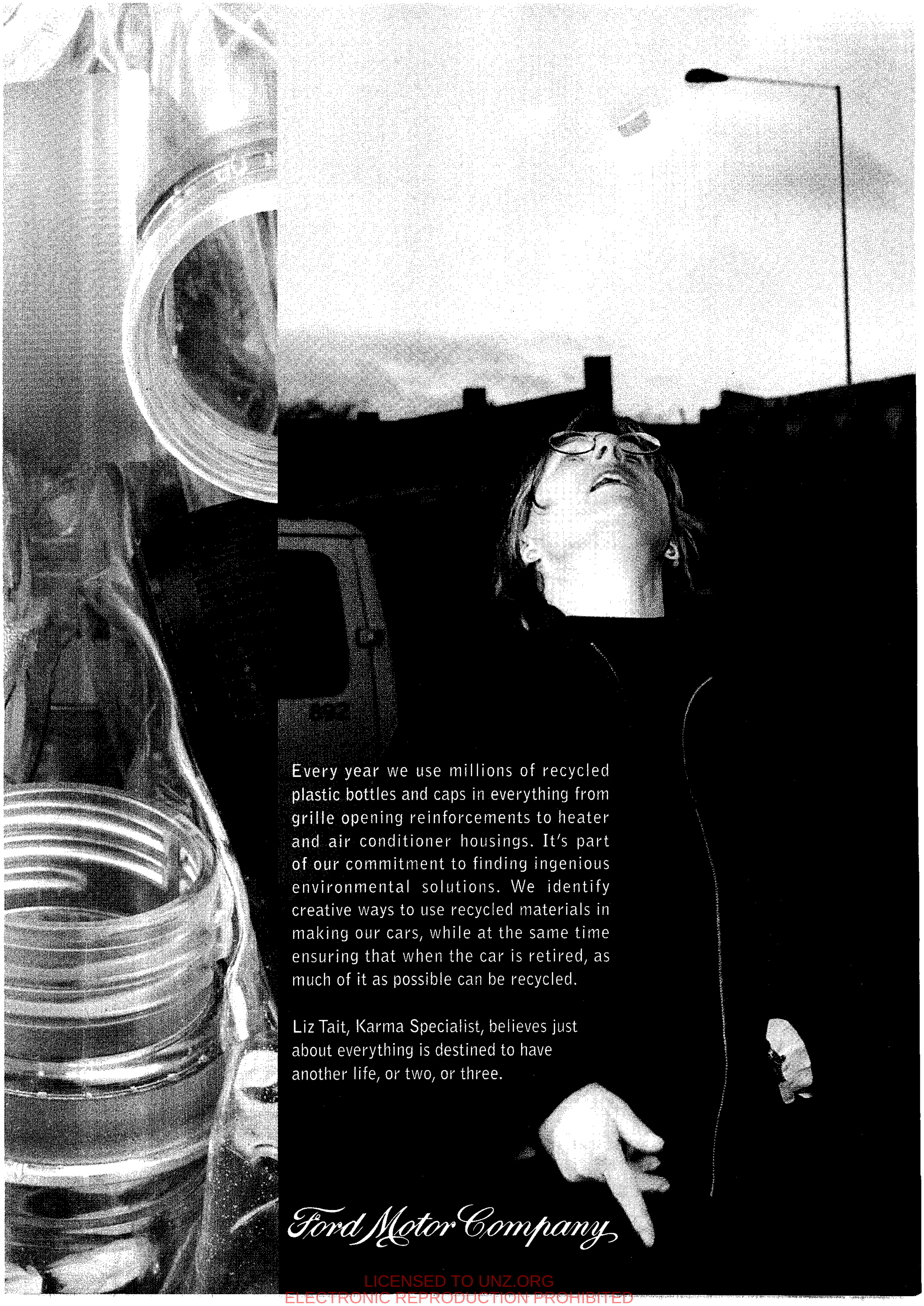

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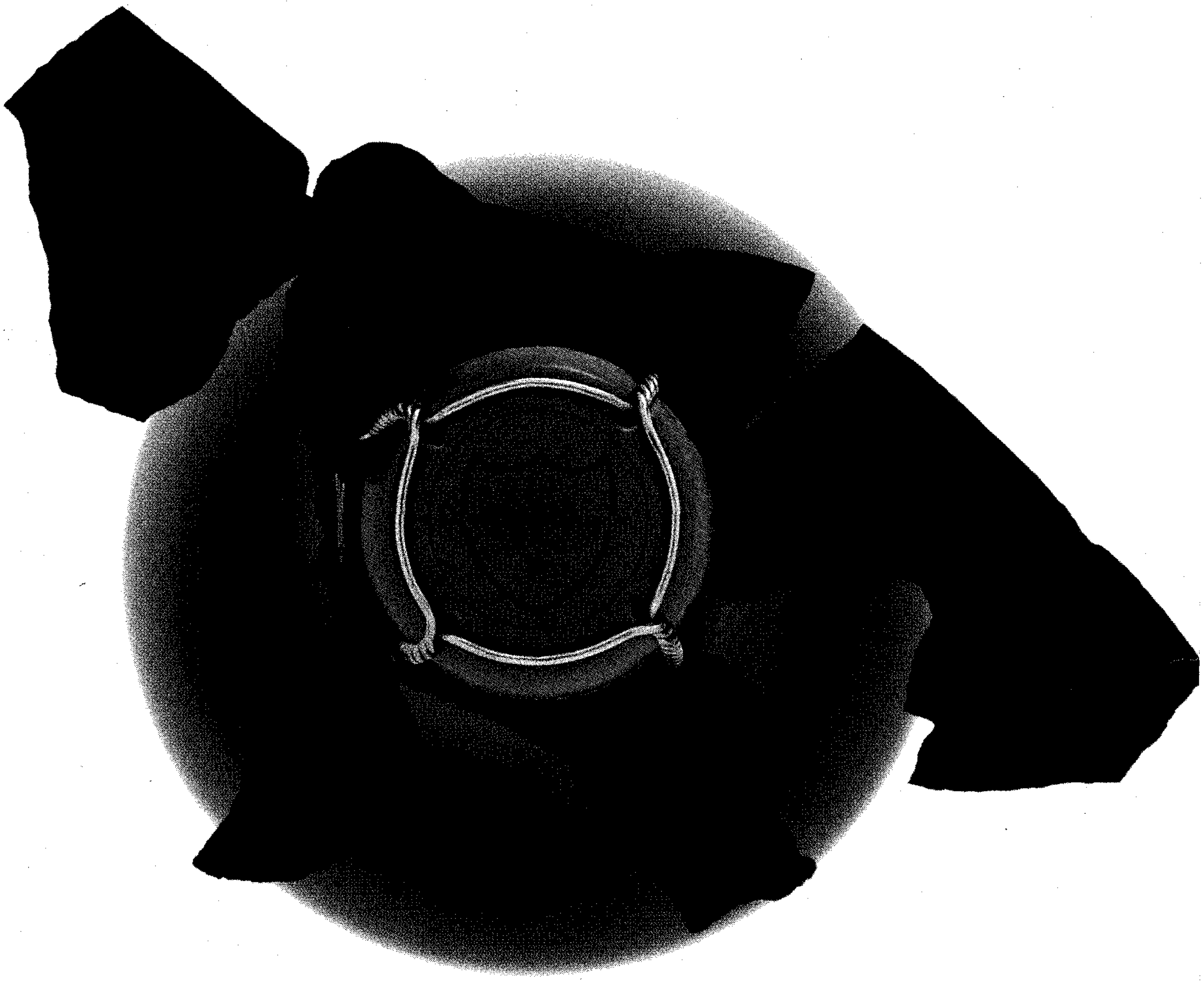

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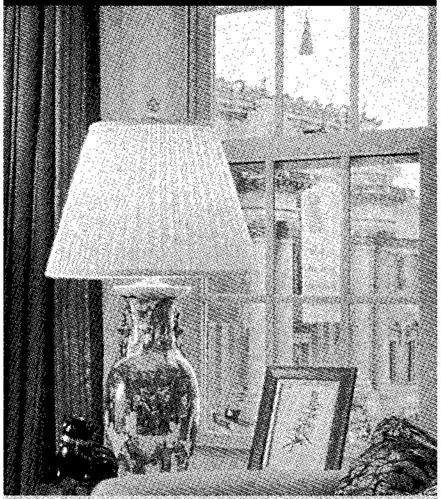

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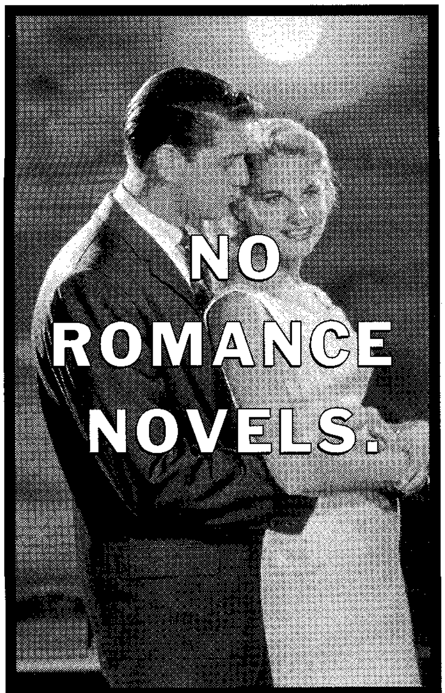

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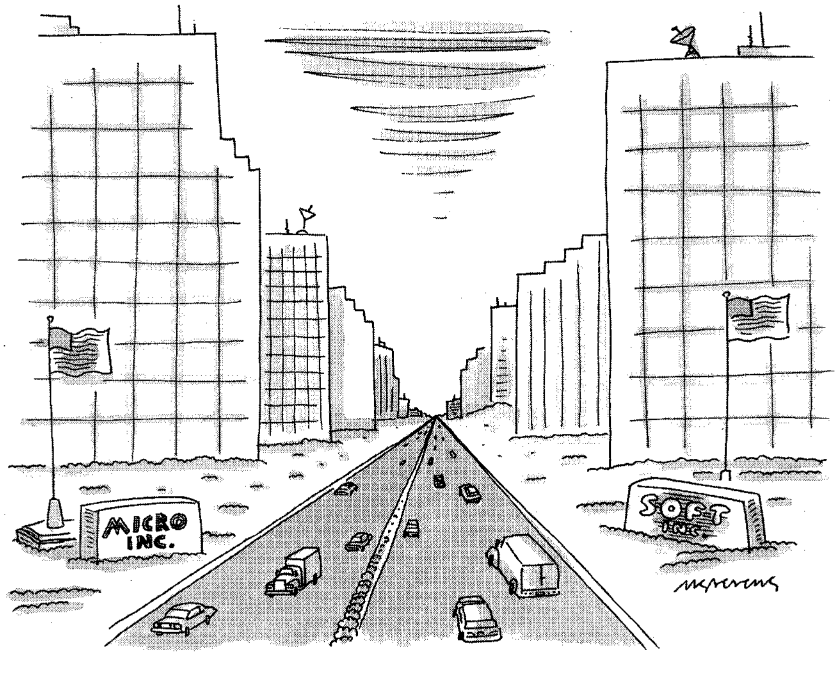
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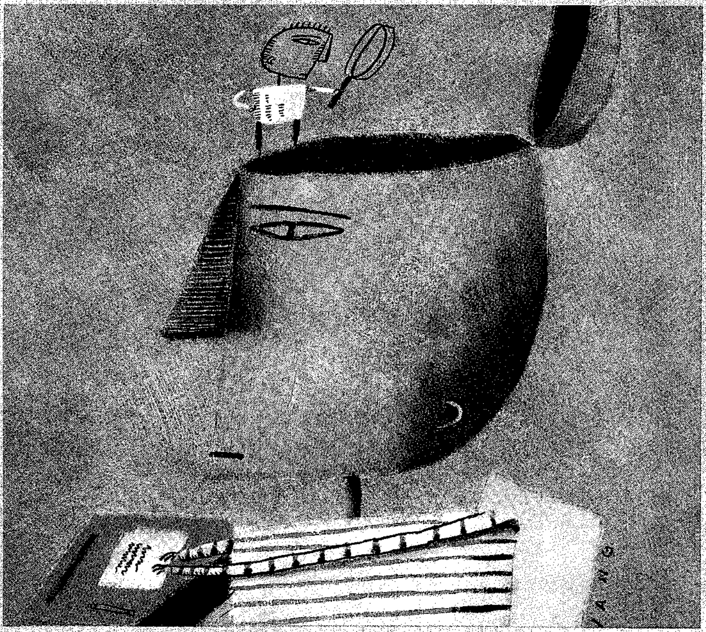

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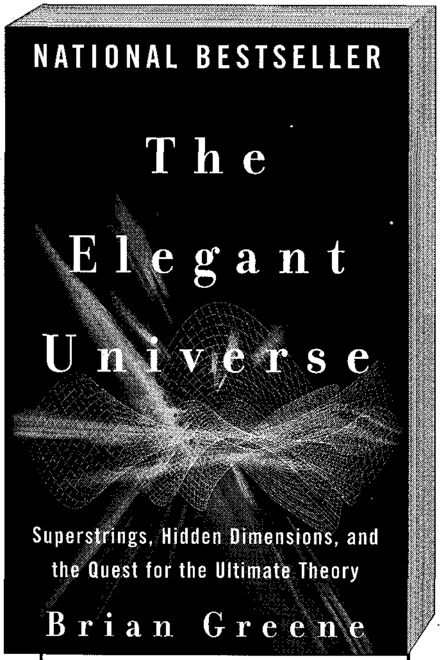
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SEEDS OF DOUBT

Michael Specter seems to be implying that bioengineering by hybridization and other modifications of nature in previous centuries had no, or few, deleterious side effects ("The Pharmageddon Riddle," April 10th). It did, of course; often disastrous ones. The process of moving plants and animals into areas to which they are not native, and concentrating them in large, single-species conglomerations, is a prime example. For instance, when prickly-pear cacti were introduced to Australia in the early part of the twentieth century their population exploded, choking fields and roads. Yet herbicides and insecticides wouldn't work in many "natural" environments, where large congregations of same-species, nearly genetically identical groups are rare. Having committed ourselves to large-scale agriculture, we no longer have much choice: we *have* to meddle with nature. It would be good, though, if we were to endeavor to do so with rather more caution than has been exercised in past episodes of bioengineering.

Valerie Shubert
Seattle, Wash.

Although Michael Specter covers the genetically modified food controversy with thoroughness and tact, his identification of the core problem—increasing population, along with diminishing arable land and usable water—begs for more attention. Humans have a knack for designing solutions that address symptoms rather than causes, and Monsanto's use of agricultural biotechnology (whether to weed out starvation and malnutrition or to make a fast buck) expresses this behavioral trait all too well.

Scott Campbell
Seattle, Wash.

ANALYSIS AND OBSESSION

As a psychoanalytically oriented psychologist, I was troubled by Jerome Groopman's "The Doubting Disease" (April 10th). The models for understanding obsessive-compulsive aspects of experience that Groopman presented were limited to neurobiology and behaviorism. In my experience, both are helpful as explanations and as interventions, but many people also want to gain insight into the causes of the anxiety that they are trying their best to manage with obsessional thinking or compulsive acts. For instance, Groopman discusses the case of a teen-age girl with intrusive thoughts of harm befalling her parents. Isn't it possible that she was trying to manage feelings of anger or ambivalence toward her parents, feelings that might not have been acceptable to her conscious mind? Might dealing with those feelings once her symptoms were under control have allowed her to better manage her anxiety? The absence of the analytic perspective was particularly troubling because it seems emblematic of the increasing tendency of some psychiatrists to overlook our patients' humanity.

Stephen R. Knowlton, Ph.D.
Somerville, Mass.

CAMP CULTURE

I was a little disturbed by the April 10th cartoon "Good news—I got you into a terrorist camp"; it seems like an example of the frequent media suggestion that "Arab" or "Muslim" equals "terrorist." We look to the Middle East first whenever a terrorist event occurs in this country, but the worst of those events—the Oklahoma City bombing and the Unabomber's attacks—have been perpetrated by white American males. Don't get me wrong, I'm as politically incorrect as the next girl, but next time the cartoon should be pointed at the real laughingstock.

Samantha Franco
Riverdale, N.Y.

•

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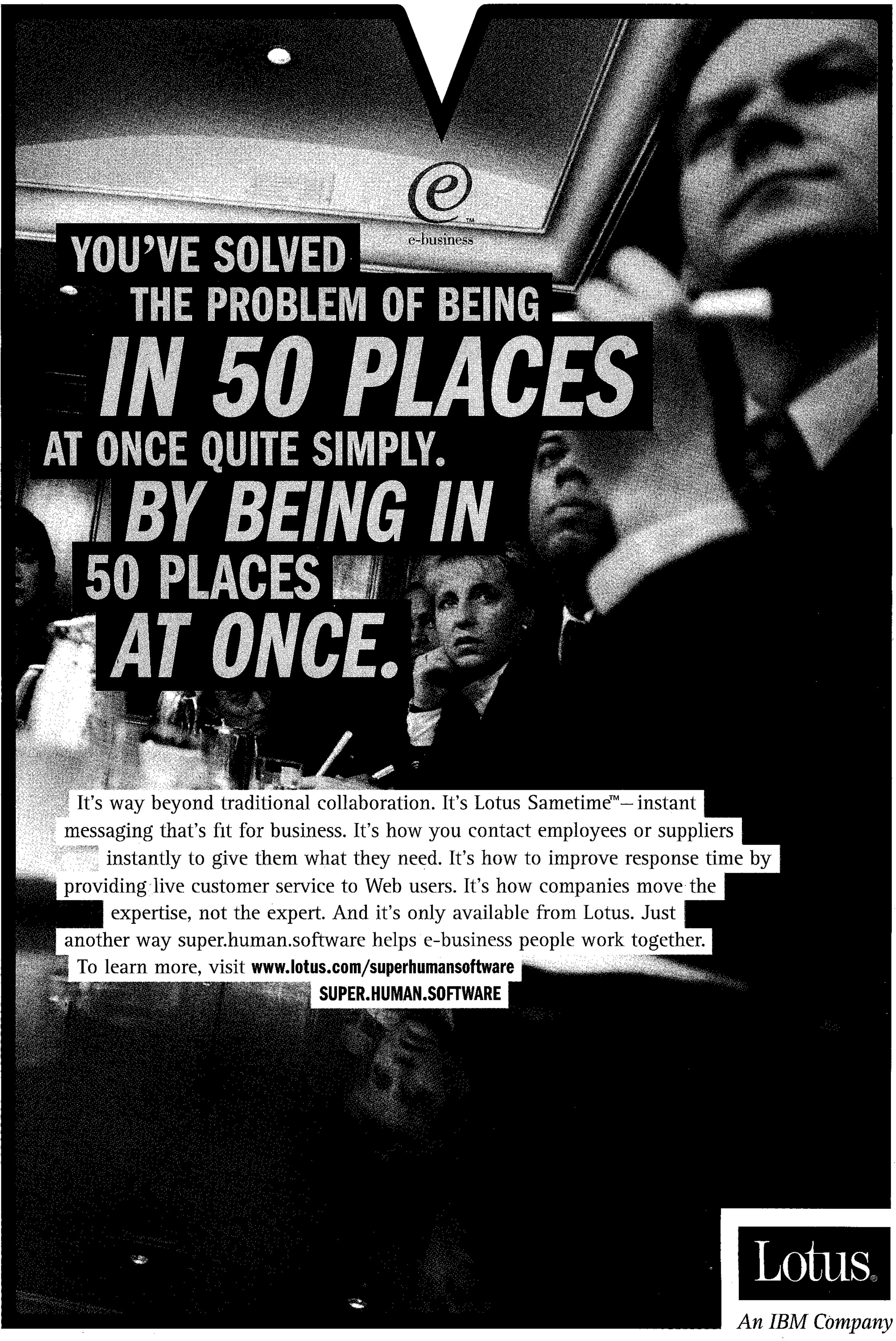

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

THE THEATRE
OPENINGS & PREVIEWS

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ACHE
A hundred and thirty-nine explicit, post-breakup poems by the novelist Blake Nelson, adapted for the stage by the Bat Theatre Company and performed by Mr. Nelson. Previews begin May 11. (The Flea, 41 White St., between Broadway and Church St. 226-0051.)

ENTER THE GUARDSMAN
A musical romance based on Ferenc Molnar's "The Guardsman," starring Robert Cuccioli, Marla Schaffel, and Mark Jacoby. In previews. (Vineyard Theatre, 108 E. 15th St. 239-6200.)

HYPATIA
In Mac Wellman's latest play, the fifth-century mathematician and philosopher travels through time bearing gifts. Previews May 10-12. Opens May 13 at 7:30. (Soho Rep, 46 Walker St. 334-0962.)

THE LARAMIE PROJECT
A drama about the murder of gay-hate victim Matthew Shepard, written and directed by Moisés Kaufman ("Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde"). In previews. (Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 307-4100.)

LUCRECE
From the Willow Cabin Theatre Company, Thornton Wilder's 1932 translation of "Le Viol de Lucrece," by André Obey. Previews May 12-14. Opens May 15 at 7. (Ohio Theatre, 66 Wooster St. 886-1889.)

LYDIE BREEZE
John Guare has rewritten his two 1982 plays, "Lydie Breeze" and "Magnolia," as a drama in two parts, presented in rotating repertory. In previews through May 14. Opens May 15 at 8. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 460-5475.)

PROOF
Mary-Louise Parker stars in a drama by David Auburn, about an enigmatic woman, her genius father, and a mysterious math proof. In previews. (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

PURGATORY / THE CAT AND THE MOON
An evening of two one-acts by W. B. Yeats, directed by Royd Climenhaga. May 14-16 at 8. Continues through May 23. (Hudson Guild Theatre, 441 W. 26th St. 229-7881.)

ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY
The troupe begins a three-week residency at the Brooklyn Academy of Music with T. S. Eliot's "The Family Reunion." May 10-13 at 7:30. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100.)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
14	15	16	10	11	12	13

TWO-HEADED
A tragicomedy by Julie Jensen, set on the Utah frontier in the nineteenth century. In previews. (Women's Project Theatre, 424 W. 55th St. 239-6200.)

WHEN THEY SPEAK OF RITA
Daisy B. Foote's drama, about a discontented housewife in rural New Hampshire. In previews. (Primary Stages, 354 W. 45th St. 333-4052.)

OPENED RECENTLY

ABIE'S ISLAND ROSE
The Jewish Repertory Theatre presents a musical comedy about a romance between a Jewish med student from New York and an Afro-Caribbean nurse. (Playhouse 91, at 316 E. 91st St. 831-2000.)

THE ACTING COMPANY
The touring troupe presents Shakespeare's "Macbeth" (May 11-13). (St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th St. 279-4200.)

AIDA
Disney's new musical—five years in the making and a product of Pharaonic expense—is, if not perfect, a lively, polished entertainment with bursts of joyful flamboyance worthy of its composer, Elton John. (Tim Rice's lyrics are mostly plodding and clunky, but they don't detract too much from the proceedings.) The two female leads—Heather Headley, as Aida, and Sherie René Scott, as Amneris—shine in their different ways, and Bob Crowley's brilliant sets give the show both visual dazzle and emotional resonance. Also with Adam Pascal, as Radames, who, looking like a Harlequin-romance cover model and sounding a little like Michael Bolton, doesn't quite pack the punch that his two co-stars do. Directed by Robert Falls. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/10/00.) (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 307-4747.)

AMADEUS
From London, a revival of Peter Shaffer's drama, starring Michael Sheen as Mozart and David Suchet as Salieri. Sir Peter Hall is the director. (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

AMERICAN BUFFALO
In the Atlantic Theatre Company's lucid but uninspired staging of David Mamet's great 1975 play, the actors' chemistry never quite fills out the humiliated hearts of their characters—a junk-shop owner named Don (Philip Baker Hall), his young junkie gofer (the poignant, baby-faced Mark Webber), and Teach (the expert William H. Macy), a petty criminal who kisses himself in on a scam to steal back a nickel for which some dealer has paid Don ninety dollars. Still, Mamet's play is some kind of theatrical miracle. (3/27/00) (336 W. 20th St. 239-6200. Closes May 21.)

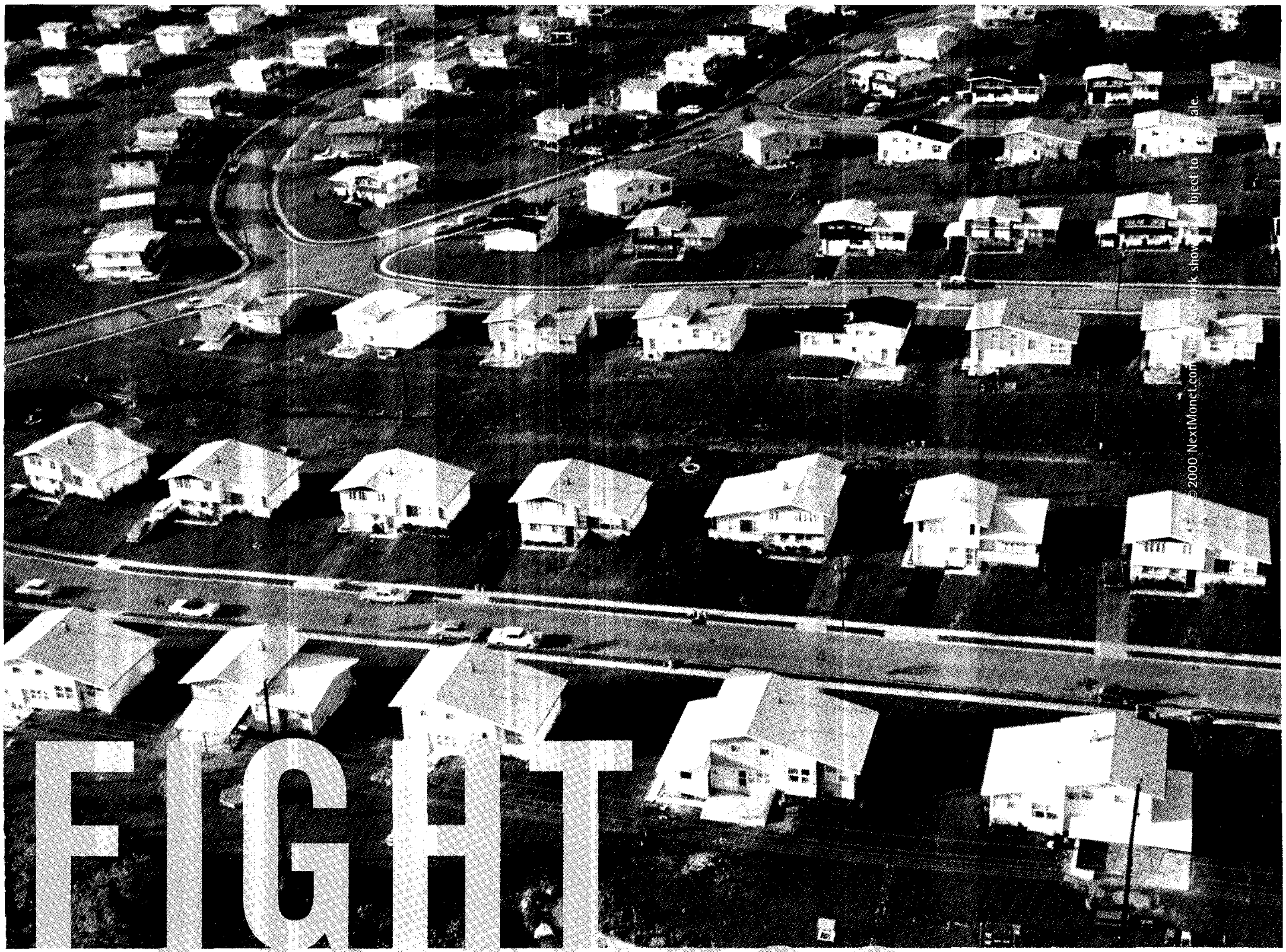
THE BOMB-ITTY OF ERRORS
In this exuberant take on "The Comedy of Errors," the action has been shifted to a hip-hop realm, and the basic ideas remain the same, but the four extravagantly talented writer-actors (who play all of the parts) make it seem altogether new. (45 Bleecker, 45 Bleecker St., at Lafayette St. 307-4100.)

COBB
In his brilliantly constructed play about baseball's greatest hitter and most brutal schoolyard bully, Lee Blessing places three actors (Michael Cullen, Matt Mabe, and Michael Sabatino) onstage together to portray Tyrus Raymond Cobb, who reminisces from the afterlife and interacts with himself at various stages in his professional and personal life. For Cobb, baseball was a place to stake kingship, but here he's haunted by a forgotten legend, Negro Leaguer and Hall of Famer Oscar Charleston, who forces him to confront the social injustices he sheepishly dodged during his lifetime, denying himself, as well as the nation, a chance at true greatness. Clark Jackson releases a triumphant monologue as the embittered yet dignified Charleston. (Melting Pot Theatre, 311 W. 43rd St. 279-4200. Closes May 20.)

CONTACT
The director and choreographer Susan Stroman's dance play, a triptych of simple stories about the various forms of human connection and the atmosphere of longing, is a big-hearted, witty crowd-pleaser. (10/18-25/99) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

COPENHAGEN
Michael Frayn's drama, which was inspired by a meeting in 1941 between the German physicist Werner Heisenberg and his Danish counterpart Niels Bohr. Michael Blakemore is the director. (4/24 & 5/1/00) (Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

THE DESIGNATED MOURNER
Wallace Shawn, Deborah Eisenberg, and Larry Pine make up the cast in Mr. Shawn's 1996 play, directed by André Gregory. (Reviewed in this issue.) (21 South William Street. 532-8887.)



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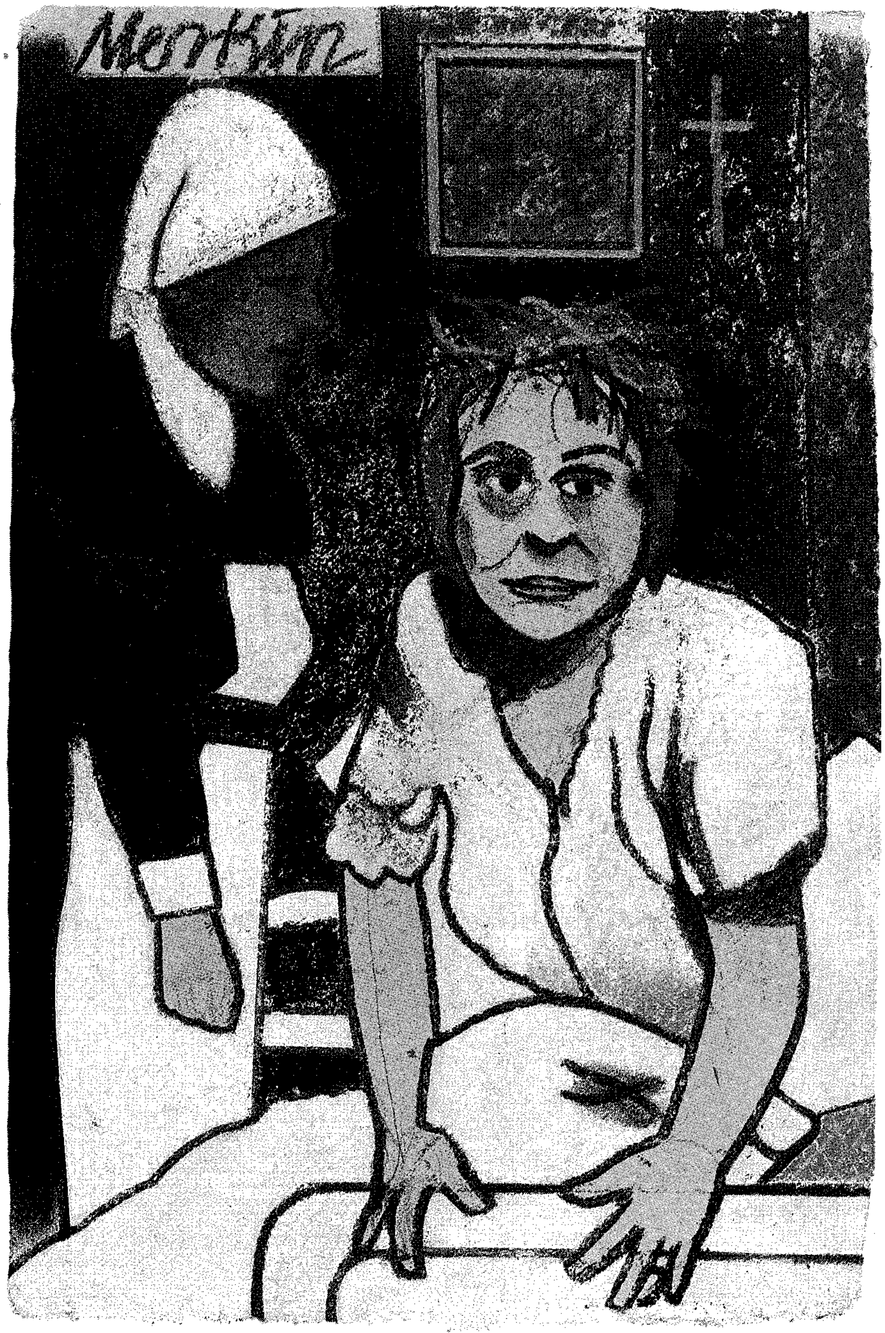


Sinéad Cusack, in "Our Lady of Sligo," at the Irish Rep.

RICHARD MERKIN

THE DIRECTOR
The playwright Nancy Hasty asks whether acting (which is essentially lying) can reveal deeper truth. It's a smart play, and, though it's not entirely satisfying intellectually, John Shea's brilliant performance as the director almost makes it seem so. (Arclight, 152 W. 71st St. 279-4200.)

DIRTY BLONDE
Claudia Shear and James Lapine's cunningly written, raffish play, which was staged earlier this year at New York Theatre Workshop, has moved to Broadway. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

ENSEMBLE STUDIO THEATRE
Series A in this year's six-week marathon of one-acts runs through May 14, with plays by Billy Aronson, Leslie Ayvazian, Steve Feffer, and Romulus Linney. The marathon continues through June 11. (549 W. 52nd St. 247-4982.)

THE FIVE HYSTERICAL GIRLS THEOREM
A mixed group of eccentric mathematicians gathers and reconfigures, intellectually and emotionally, at a seaside resort, in a comedy by Rinne Groff. (Connelly Theatre, 220 E. 4th St. 358-3657.)

THE GREEN BIRD
The director Julie Taymor brings Carlo Gozzi's fairy tale to the stage with puppets, masks, and live performers. The music is by Elliot Goldenthal. (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

HOTEL UNIVERSE
The Blue Light Theatre Company wraps up the season with Philip Barry's 1930 play, about a group of American expatriates vacationing on the French Riviera after the First World War. (McGinn/Cazale, Broadway at 76th St. 279-4200.)

JACKIE MASON: MUCH ADO ABOUT EVERYTHING
The comic is back on Broadway. (Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR
To paraphrase Woody Allen: If Jesus Christ were alive today, he'd never stop throwing up. For those of us with less than Christ-like standards, though, this misguided Broadway revival of Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1971 musical version of the Saviour's last days on earth is less nauseating than it is plain disappointing. The show, which began as a concept album and should have stayed one, starts out by asking the tantalizing question "What's the buzz?" but never delivers a theatrically satisfying answer. Still, with its archaic whiff of right-wing outrage and singable seventies-rock score, it's fun for nostalgia's sake. Gale Edwards is the director. (Ford Center for the Performing Arts, 213 W. 43rd St. 307-4100.)

JITNEY
August Wilson's first play, set in 1977, about the lives of a group of Pittsburgh gypsy-cab drivers. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 246-4422.)

KISS ME, KATE
With all its admirable expertise and its various delights, this production of the Cole Porter musical is oddly earthbound: it comes down to the vexing issue of chemistry. The leads, Marin Mazzie and Brian Stokes Mitchell, are expert players, but they are not—in the true meaning of the words—star performers. (11/29/99) (Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

LI'L BROWN BROTHERS/NIKIMALIKA (I'VE BEEN TO AMERICA)
Chris B. Millado's drama examines the 1904 St. Louis World Exposition's Philippine Exhibit, in which Filipinos were put on display as savages. (Grove Street Playhouse, 39 Grove St. 581-8896. Closes May 21.)

MANCHILD IN THE PROMISED LAND
Claude Brown's 1965 autobiographical novel, about growing up in Harlem, adapted for the stage by Wynn Handman and Joseph Edward. (American Place Theatre, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200. Closes May 21.)

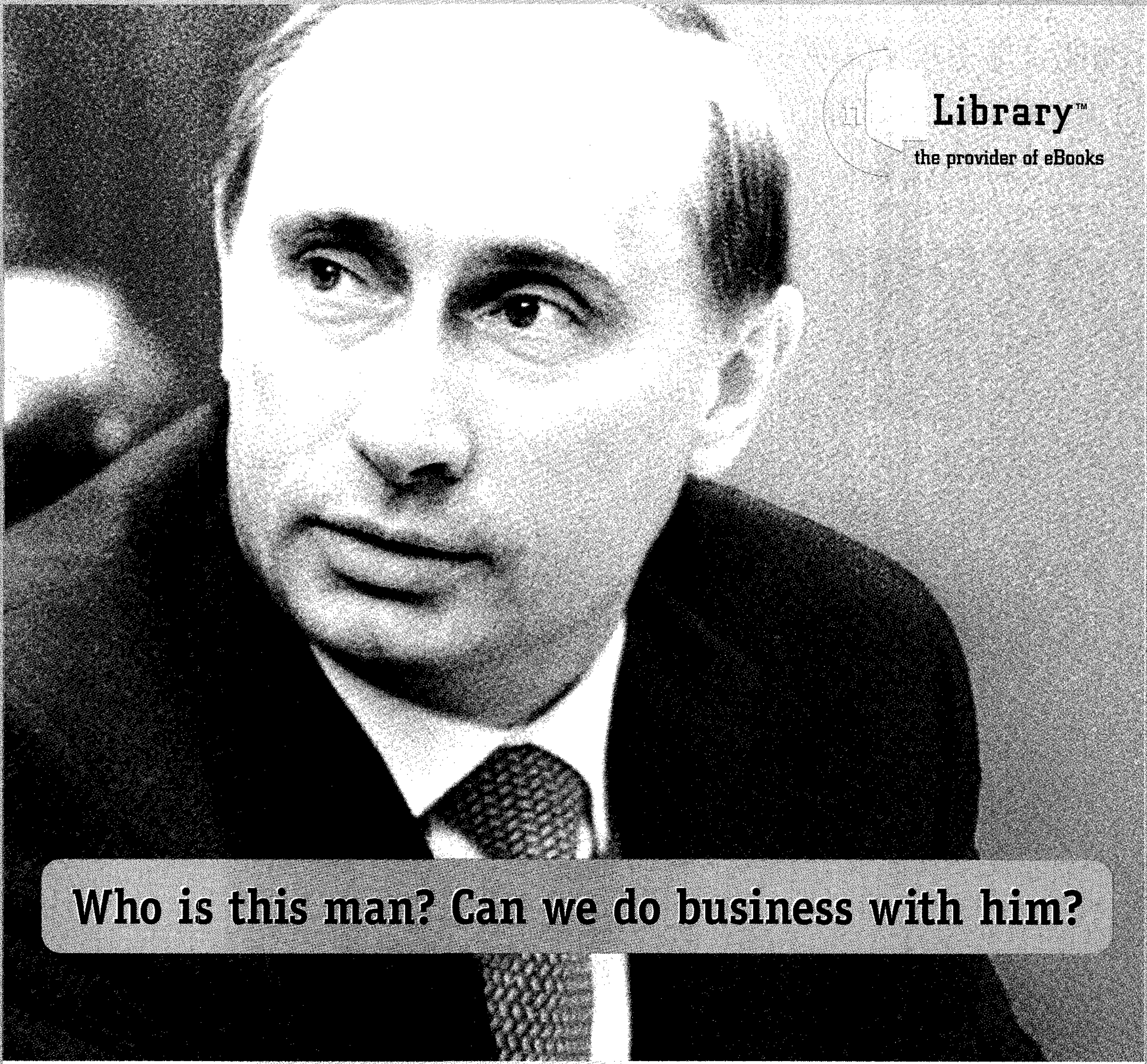
A MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN
A solid and satisfying revival of Eugene O'Neill's 1943 drama. Gabriel Byrne's performance as James Tyrone, an alcoholic actor who returns to his Connecticut farm from New York to unburden himself in the arms of the earth mother Josie (Cherry Jones), is something to see: though his character is half-dead from drink, Byrne's vivid portrait conjures all the dimensions of the tortured emotion that got him there. Daniel Sullivan directed. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

THE MUSIC MAN
Craig Bierko is Professor Harold Hill, and Rebecca Luker is Marian the Librarian, in a revival of Meredith Willson's 1957 musical. Susan Stroman is the director. (Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 307-4100.)

OUR LADY OF SLIGO
Sinéad Cusack has the leading role in Sebastian Barry's latest drama, under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark. (5/8/00) (Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. 727-2737.)

THE REAL THING
Before the young British playwright Patrick Marber's drama about the excruciating machinations of coupledom, "Closer" (1997), there was this one by the seasoned British playwright Tom Stoppard, in 1984; in comparison, Stoppard's take seems surprisingly innocent (how did we ever manage to torture one another without computers?). But revived here with an excellent cast (especially Stephen Dillane) and subtle direction by David Leveaux, the elder playwright's most accessible work remains the wittiest, sharpest look at that twisted thing called love to come around in decades. (Ethel Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

THE RIDE DOWN MT. MORGAN
"Why have I been condemned?" the aptly named bigamist Lyman Felt (Patrick Stewart) asks, rather whinily, toward the end of Arthur Miller's latest play, an examination of the seeming impossibility of fidelity, or, at least, lifelong marriage. And you trust that Lyman is truly in the dark about how he could be convicted of having love for two women—the childlike but uptight and aging Wasp he first married (the wonderful Frances Conroy), and a sexy, sophisticated, but oblivious young Jew (Katy Selverstone). The problem with Miller's project is that his lying Lyman is no longer in love with his first wife at all, and he seems to have only lust for the second. In the end, it makes a really good case for divorce. David Esbjornson directed. (Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)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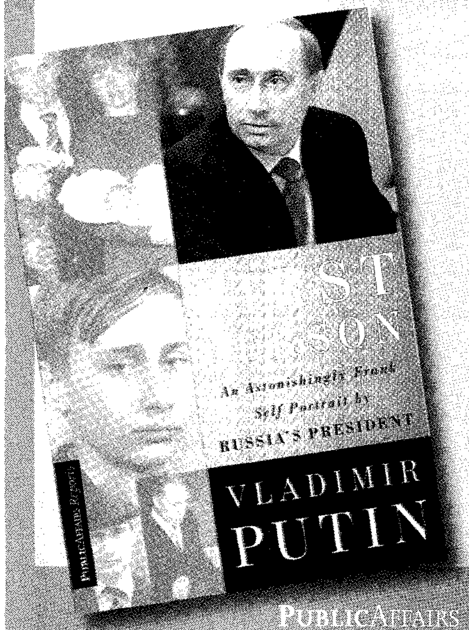
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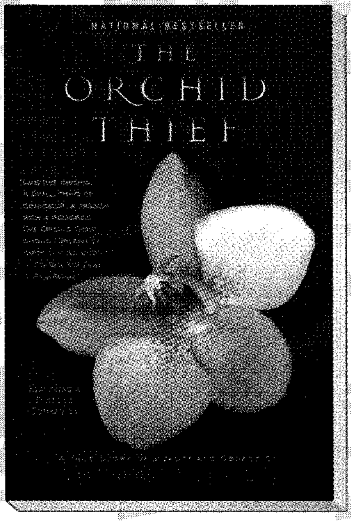

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ROSE
Olympia Dukakis has the title role in a new play by Martin Sherman, which traces a Jewish woman's life, from her childhood in Russia to the Warsaw ghettos to Miami Beach. Nancy Meckler is the director. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER
The musical, based on the 1977 film. (Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

SMALL CRAFT WARNING
An encore revival by the Worth Street Theatre of their 1999 staging of the Tennessee Williams play. David Greenspan leads the cast. (Tribeca Playhouse, 111 Reade St. 532-8887.)

SONG OF SONGS
Sholom Aleichem's love story is the basis for this musical, with a book by Daniel Goldstein and a score by Michael Friedman. (Greenwich Street Theatre, 547 Greenwich St. 592-4005. Closes May 20.)

SWING!
No plot, just a hot band, Olympic-class dancers, and major panties—this show, a tribute to swing and its dance counterpart, the Lindy (mother of the jitterbug), lives up to its name. It swings. Directed and choreographed by Lynne Taylor-Corbett. (St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

TALLER THAN A DWARF
From the pen of Elaine May, a new comedy starring Matthew Broderick and Parker Posey and directed by Alan Arkin. (Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

WAITING IN THE WINGS
In the best of Noël Coward's postwar plays, old gallant theatricals duke it out in a retirement home, where they fire off some terrific one-liners. Although the play itself is somewhat creaky, the pros who bring it to life here aren't. (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)

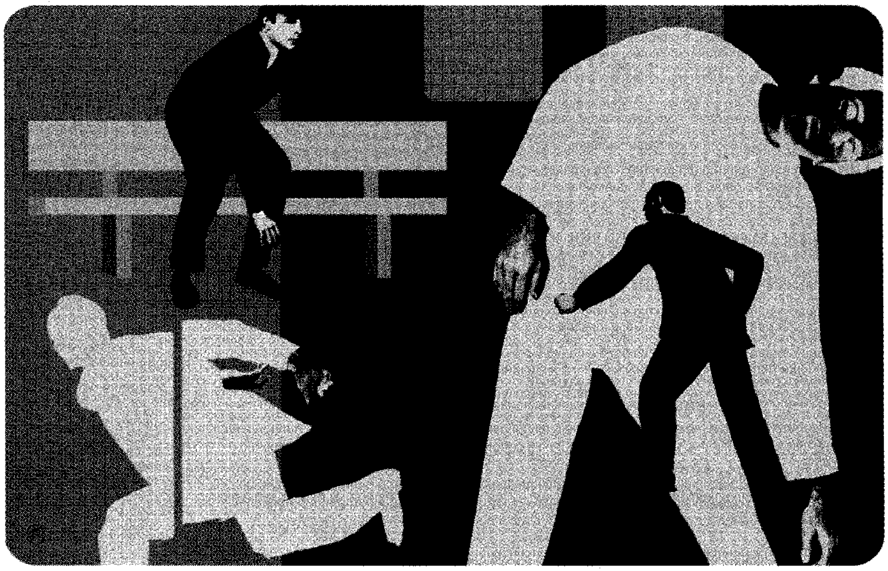
WAKE UP AND SMELL THE COFFEE
Eric Bogosian's latest solo show, directed by Jo Bonney. (Jane Street Theatre, Hotel Riverview Ballroom, 113 Jane St. 239-6200.)

THE WAVERLY GALLERY
Eileen Heckart portrays an aging Greenwich Village art dealer who must give up her gallery, in a new play by Kenneth Lonergan. (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 239-6200. Closes May 21.)

THE WILD DUCK
The Century Center's Ibsen series continues with the playwright's 1884 drama. (111 E. 15th St. 982-6782. Closes May 20.)

THE WILD PARTY
Joseph Moncure March's Jazz Age poem is the basis for Michael John LaChiusa and George C. Wolfe's new musical, starring Mandy Patinkin, Eartha Kitt, and Toni Collette. Mr. Wolfe is the director. (4/24 & 5/1/00) (Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 239-6200.)

YARD GAL
From London's Royal Court Theatre, Rebecca Prichard's drama about two juvenile delinquents on the run in London. (MCC, 120 W. 28th St. 727-7765. Closes May 21.)



John Taylor and Christopher Steel in Beppie Blankert's "Double Track," at D.T.W.

JOHN RITTER

TRUE WEST
A thrilling revival of Sam Shepard's 1980 play, directed by Matthew Warchus. It's a droll tall tale of sibling rivalry, in which an intrusive, beer-swilling outlaw named Lee and his brother, Austin, a put-upon Ivy League screenwriter, face off in their vacationing mother's tidy modern kitchen. John C. Reilly's roaring, as Lee, and Philip Seymour Hoffman's repressed hostility, as Austin, make for a wonderful contrast and a satisfyingly equal battle of wills, but when the actors switch roles (every few performances), Hoffman's derelict eyes, slurred sea-dog voice, and preternatural comic skills make the contest entertaining but lopsided. (3/27/00) (Circle in the Square, 50th St. west of Broadway. 239-6200.)

UNCLE VANYA
Derek Jacobi, Laura Linney, Brian Murray, and Roger Rees take on Chekhov's play, under the direction of Michael Mayer. (5/8/00) (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 307-4100.)

THE VALLEY OF IAO
Lee Nagrin's new performance piece is based on conversations with her brother, about his life as an itinerant street preacher in Maui. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 475-7710. Closes May 14.)

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
May 10-12 and May 16 at 8, May 13 at 2 and 8, and May 14 at 3: "The Sleeping Beauty." (New York State Theatre. 870-5570. Through June 25.)

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE
May 10 at 2 and 8: "Theme and Variations," "Jardin aux Lilas," "Other Dances," and "Variations on a Theme by Haydn." ♦ May 12 and May 15 at 8 and May 13 at 2 and 8: "Don Quixote." (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000. Through July 1.)

TRISHA BROWN DANCE COMPANY
To celebrate its thirtieth-anniversary season, the troupe fills a fortnight of dates with revivals, recent repertory, and three premières, including "Rapture to Leon James," an homage to the thirties-era Savoy Ballroom dancer. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. May 9-12 at 8, May 13 at 2 and 8, and May 14 at 2 and 7.)

SEÁN CURRAN COMPANY
The choreographer remains a dazzling interpreter of his own pyrotechnic footwork: this season he

adds one solo, "Approaching a City," to his repertory. But, despite these individual gifts, his reputation of late rests more on his thoughtful group works. The three on this program include "Six Laments," a haunting series of solos and duets danced in front of a set of venetian blinds on which the faces of friends appear and vanish. (Danspace Project, St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 674-8194. May 11-14 at 8:30.)

"DOUBLE TRACK"

Danspace Project and Dance Theatre Workshop combine forces to present a marvel of duplicity: for the second time around, the Dutch choreographer Beppie Blankert presents a 1986 duet nominally about waiting for a train (several of which pass by without stopping, as required by the text, Beckett's "Text for Nothing No. 7"). The original called for women dancers, but Blankert's metaphysical trickery works just as well with men (Christopher Steel and John Taylor), who, through the seamless use of onstage mirrors, appear to switch back and forth from solid form to spectral presence, vanishing or bleeding into each other. All the while you can hear them dancing, offstage, hidden from sight, disembodied. (219 W. 19th St. 924-0077. May 12-13 at 7 and 9 and May 14 at 7. Through May 21.)

"DING DONG TOUCHES THE MOON"

The director Jin Hi Kim and the choreographer Sin Cha Hong blend themes from Eastern mythology and Western exploration of the solar system in a multimedia work that features an electrified *komungo* (a fourth-century Korean zither) and dancers equipped with velocity sensors that trigger video and slide projections of images from deep space. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 255-5793. May 10-13 at 8.)

"RIGHTEOUS BABES"

The erotic-dancer-turned-choreographer Maura Nguyen Donohue presents a new evening-length work about body politics, whose movements are drawn from such diverse sources as martial arts, stage combat, contact improvisation, and burlesque. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288. May 11-14 at 8:30.)

"THE BEAT"

Former "Stomp" member Kamal Sinclair collaborates with playwright Robbie McCauley and poet Mustafa Shakir in a dance-theatre work that features Bakaari Wilder, the slack and lanky tapper whose easy cool countered Savion Glover's percussive heat in "Bring in da Noise." (Context Studios, 28 Avenue A, at 2nd St. 802-9350. May 11-13 at 8. Through May 20.)

"NEW SEX"

As a dancer, the fluent Terry Hollis has been almost ubiquitous, appearing with a remarkable range of companies. In the past two years, he's proven equally watchable as a choreographer: his new work explores sexual communication in a range of situations from the workplace to the home front. (Dixon Place at Vineyard 26, 309 E. 26th St. 532-1546. May 11 at 8 and May 14 at 3. Through May 21.)

NIGHT LIFE

CONCERTS

JORMA KAUKONEN & FRIENDS

The Hot Tuna legend leads his trio through an evening of blues-drenched guitar, with the help of guitarist Michael Falzarano, keyboardist Pete Sears, and others. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 840-2824. May 11 at 8.)

"HIGHLIGHTS IN JAZZ"

Forty-three years after his tragic death in an auto accident at twenty-six, jazz still hasn't seen the likes of a trumpeter like Clifford Brown. Paying tribute at this show to the young man with the golden tone, unlimited vitality, astonishing technique, and the God-given ability to make every note burst with joie de vivre are some weighty figures from his short but brilliant career, including drummer Max Roach, vocalist Helen Merrill, and saxophonist Teddy Edwards; trumpeter Lew Soloff has the unenviable job of evoking the irreplaceable Brown. (Pace Downtown Theatre, Spruce St. between Nassau and Gold Sts. 346-1715. May 11 at 8.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

BAM CAFÉ

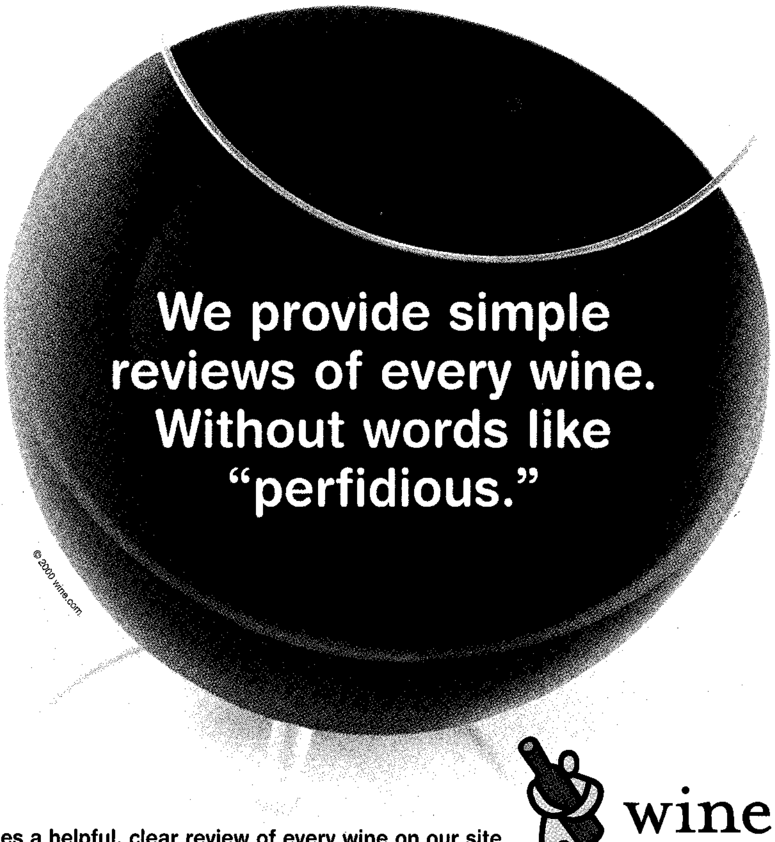
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4139)—May 11: Drummer **Billy Martin,** whose work with his regular outfit, Medeski, Martin & Wood, is moving toward straight-ahead jazz, indulges his experimental side with percussionist **Calvin Weston** and turntablist **DJ Logic.**

BOTTOM LINE

15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—May 10: Cape Breton fiddler **Natalie MacMaster.** May 12: Brooklyn-born old-time folk hero **Ramblin' Jack Elliott** returns to New York City. Ditching the Borough of Kings as a teen, he hit the road to ride with the likes of Jack Kerouac, Woody Guthrie (Elliott's first hero and musical mentor), and Bob Dylan (his earliest protégé). It has been said that Elliott can leave his guitar at home and still satisfy. His inexhaustible storytelling makes him one of American's few renewable resources. With the local country outfit **Elena Skye and the Demolition String Band,** which rides high on Skye's fetching vocals and the virtuosity of guitarist Boo Reiners.

BOWERY BALLROOM

6 Delancey St. (533-2111)—May 10: Top-shelf Americana from Minneapolis's **Jayhawks.** May 12: The riveting and unclassifiable singer **Vic**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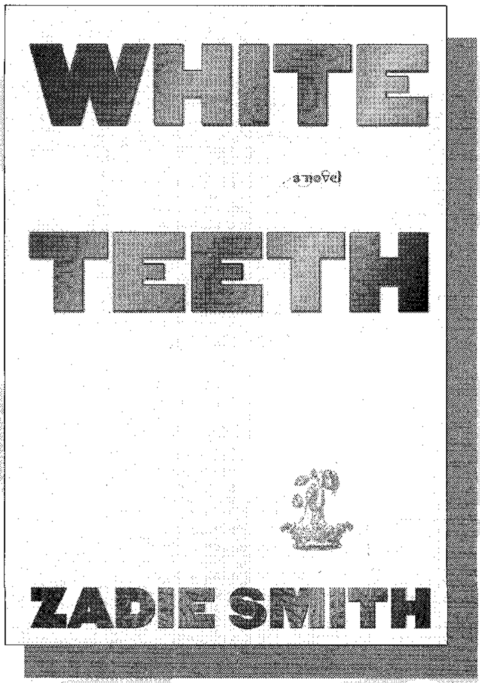

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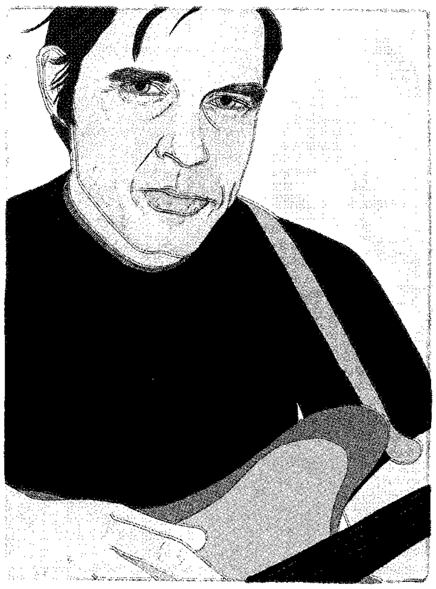


MEET JOHN DOE *The pioneering Los Angeles punk band X dissolved slowly, coming apart and coming back together through the first half of the nineteen-nineties. During that time, front man John Doe began to shift from stage to screen, with roles in such films as "Great Balls of Fire" and "Boogie Nights." When Doe did release solo records, they ventured further into the rockabilly and country territory explored in X's final phase. His most recent, "Freedom Is . . . ," uses some of Beck's backup musicians to till the same rootsy soil; when he takes the stage at Fez this week, though, Doe will be entirely on his own. Expect a set that includes some new solo material, some old solo material, and—yes—even a few X songs.*

Chesnutt performs duets with former Throwing Muses vocalist **Kristin Hersh.** May 13: **Kittie,** four angry teen-age girls from Ontario, Canada, whose talent for thrashing heavy metal is augmented by delightfully churlish showmanship: one of their onstage stunts involves destroying a blow-up doll, usually by first biting it in the crotch. May 16: The crooked grin and dusty-booted songs of **Jerry Jeff Walker,** who is perhaps still best known for his early-seventies ode to a fellow named Bojangles.

FEZ
380 Lafayette St. (533-7000)—A comfortable neo-Moroccan bar hidden inside the Time Café. May 10: **John Doe.** May 16: Eighties folk star **Suzanne Vega.** The **Mingus Big Band** still packs them in every Thursday. Dining.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—May 11: Former Grateful Dead drummer **Mickey Hart** stops by with his band. May 12: **Travis.** Britain's latest flavor of the month has watched its polymorphously melancholy second album, "The Man Who," a frequently brilliant bell jar of broken hearts and bad dreams, spend an alarmingly long time at the top of the U.K. charts. Given that the quartet's front man, Fran Healy, seems to have been raised on Prozac, this would seem to be a triumphant post-Spice Girls return to navel gazing. Having survived a trying opening-act slot for Oasis, Travis

LARA TOMLIN

has also become an exquisitely lean, road-tested touring act. May 15: **Wire.** As influential to the birth of alternative rock as the Velvet Underground, this London quartet released its début record, "Pink Flag"—which featured twenty-one songs in less than thirty-six minutes—in 1977. Over the past two decades, the group has broken up countless times, but its fractured, jagged-guitar music sounds more prescient with every new incarnation.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—May 10: The Guinean guitarist **Alpha Yaya Diallo,** the Nova Scotian singer **Laurel MacDonald,** and the Cuban guitarist **Juan-Carlos Formell.** May 11: The charmingly enigmatic singer Chan Marshall, who goes by the name **Cat Power,** has a new album titled "The Covers Record." Listening to her take on "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" is a nearly hypnotic experience. Her phrasing is so slow and personal that you'll hardly recognize the song (it doesn't help that she drops the chorus and central riff), but the effect, in the end, is remarkably pleasant. And by the time she reaches "Sea of Love," the last track on the disk, you may find yourself wondering if you haven't simply imagined listening to the record. May 13: **Tony Levin,** a shy and esteemed bald bass player, best known for his work with King Crimson and Peter Gabriel. Levin lives to expand what his instrument can do. In addition to being a master of the ten-string Chapman stick, he's developed "funk fingers," a pair of small drumsticks he attaches to his fingers while playing a custom-made three-string bass.

LIMELIGHT
Sixth Ave. at 20th St. (807-7780)—May 10: **Fishbone.** The mid-eighties ska-punk vaudevillians return to promote "Psychotic Friends Nuttwerx," an inspired new effort that shows off an invitingly sensitive side. Maybe it's the inclusive group of musicians who lend a hand on the album—everyone from George Clinton and Perry Farrell to Donny Osmond pitches in.

S.O.B.'S
204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (243-4940)—In the seventies, while many of his R. & B. peers were blissfully succumbing to disco fever, singer-pianist (and poet-novelist) **Gil Scott-Heron** (May 11) was fusing jazz and funk textures with sobering political rap. He's been on tour ever since. May 16: The crafty humor and rude lyrics of albino reggae toaster **Yellowman.** Dining.

WETLANDS
161 Hudson St. (966-4225)—May 11: Old-school smooth rapper **Big Daddy Kane** was the first real "Daddy," long before any modern "Puff"-ery. With **Prince Paul** also on hand, it's guaranteed to be a weird night. At his last performance, at Irving Plaza, Paul, who is known for mixing modelling, humor, and hip-hop, pulled fans onstage, paraded them around in a fashion show, and awarded them roast-beef sandwiches.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

BAM CAFÉ
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4139)—May 12: The **Bob Moses** quartet. Drummer Moses's résumé is chock-full of significant, often downright daring, projects: Gary Burton's protofusion quartet; Burton and Carla Bley's epic "A Genuine Tong Funeral"; Pat Metheny's brilliant début, "Bright Size Life"; and Moses's own genre-scrambling orchestral-jazz recordings of the seventies and eighties among them. All of which adds up to high expectations for any new ensemble he's fronting these days.

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (581-3080)—Having come through on the substantial promise he showed with, among many others, Leon Parker and Chick Corea, the poised alto saxophonist and flute player **Steve Wilson** (here with his quartet on May 10) has elbowed past "trustworthy sideman" status straight into the big leagues. Pianist **Mulgrew Miller** will be on hand to keep things steaming. May 11-13: They called the late Hank Mobley "the middleweight champion." With a tenor saxophone sound that milked all the beauty there was to milk from his horn, aided by a not too sweet, not too rough tone that set him apart from both the West Coast cool and the East Coast hard-bop stylists, Mobley distinguished himself in the bands of Horace Silver, Art Blakey, and Miles Davis, as well as recording scores of sessions as both a sideman and as a leader, many of which now sound like classics. Three rough-riding tenors, **Craig Handy, Eric Alexander,** and **Bob Berg,** will give Mobley his props. Dining.

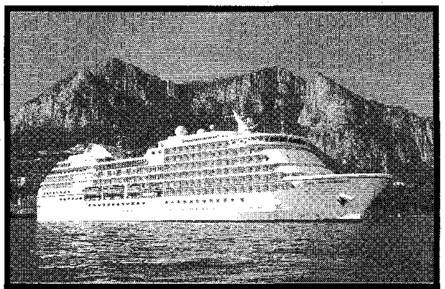
JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—The **Andrew Hill** sextet is in through May 14. Hill's music is dark, elusive, unsettling, and beautiful. The now-you-see-him-now-you-don't pianist and composer has played the role of the outsider for so long that his recent return to the spotlight must have had dizzying effects on him. Hill's artistic peak was in the nineteen-sixties, the only decade that could spawn and tolerate the inherent mysteries of his oblique harmonic stance, the derailed accents of his playing, his seesaw mid-tempo melodies, and his trademark dirgelike ballads. It was private music that

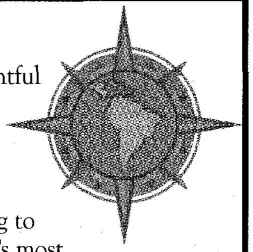
TABLES FOR TWO

CELLO
53 E. 77th St. (517-1200)—Twenty-five or thirty years from now, when someone publishes a book about New York at the turn of the millennium, this place may well be singled out as the restaurant that most reflected the peculiar masochistic swank of the Second Gilded Age. The first indication that the people who operate Cello take themselves very seriously is the series of post-reservation calls you may receive from someone who wants to be sure that you're still coming at the appointed hour. The second indication is the setting. An all but invisible brass plaque on one of the Upper East Side's less cheerful-looking town houses directs you into the presence of an impeccably impersonal hostess. She leads you down a flight of steps into a snug bar and dining room whose sleek anonymity—polished mahogany and frosted glass—has all the charm of a corporate boardroom, which is undoubtedly where many of the diners have just come from. Foliage is provided by gilded fiddles that sprout from the banquettes and reach a crescendo, of sorts, in a tree of fiddles in an outdoor garden.

Cello is the sort of establishment where murmuring waiters seem to outnumber the patrons, so much so that there is a lot of artful two-stepping at the entrance to the kitchen. The menu leans heavily in the currently fashionable direction of dishes that use seafood not as the catch of the day but as an announcement of the chef's powers of imagination—lentil-crusted scallops with an apple compote and curry sauce; soft-shell crab with tomato pulp and pomelo juice; bacon-wrapped tuna with grilled foie gras and salsify, in a balsamic-vinegar reduction; John Dory in a smoked-tomato broth with goat-cheese risotto. The wine list, which takes nearly as long to read as the stock tables in the *Wall Street Journal*, is dense with choices from practically every corner of the world except Iceland and the Fiji Islands. Desserts are similarly global—a rhubarb soufflé with fromage-blanc sorbet; a yuzu tart with ginger parfait. The ingredients are beyond reproach, the execution faultless, and the effect, for people who don't care all that much about, say, halibut innovations, rather numbing. And the cost? For the record, the three-course prix-fixe dinner is $72 (a lobster tasting menu is $87), and the average bottle of wine is around $100. But, unless Nasdaq takes another dive, who's counting? (Open weekdays for lunch and dinner, Saturdays for dinner only.)

—*Charles Michener*





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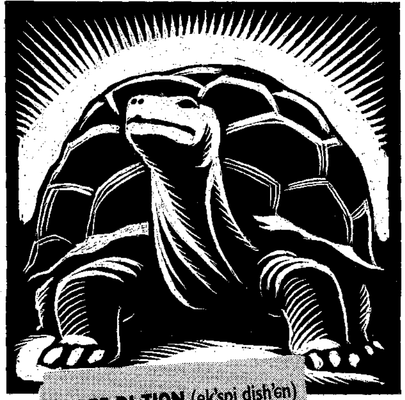
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ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

From Time to Time

Wearing a vintage wristwatch is a lot like tooling around in a Reo or a Stingray: it may be stylish, but, from a practical point of view, it has its drawbacks. Balky mechanisms can require a fair degree of maintenance; you may end up nursing a prima donna that spends half its life on the repair bench. Still, burnished cases, skeleton hands, and sapphire-set winders remain powerfully seductive.

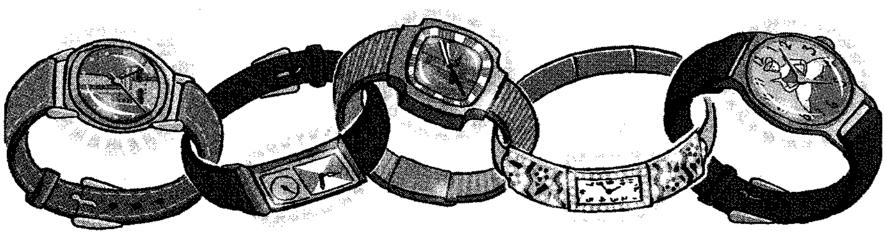
The array of antique Rolexes at **TIME WILL TELL** (962 Madison Ave.; 861-2663) is enough to turn the head of the most resolute quartz-watch wearer. "Rolex did special stuff through mass production—they really addressed human considerations," mused the shop's owner on a recent visit, showing off a seventy-year-old, nine-karat-gold, rectangular Rolex Prince ($6,700), which is known as a doctor's watch because the separate face for its second hand makes it easy to take a pulse. In addition to performing that laudable task, the Prince would cut a dashing figure counting down the seconds at the close of a particularly volatile trading day.

Just up the street, **PRIMAVERA GALLERY** (808 Madison Ave.; 288-1569) has a collection of sophisticated timepieces that clearly started life as figments of an artist's frenzied imagination. A fashionably thin nineteen-sixties watch from the house of Gucci combines eighteen-karat gold with bars of a jadelike stone called aventurine. Elegant lines, almost invisible, stand in for numerals, and the whole package is topped off with facetted crystal ($6,750). A nineteen-thirties Jaeger Le Coutre lives a double life: at first glance it's a hefty pink-gold chain bracelet, elegant enough for Mrs. Vreeland's wrist, but then one link is flipped up to reveal a tiny watch face ($18,750). At the other extreme, a gold-and-platinum extravaganza from the nineteen-twenties doesn't seem to know when to say when: its three flexible panels, encrusted with diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires in an elaborate Art Deco floral pattern, could melt the heart of the flintiest flapper ($18,000).

At **TEMPUS FUGIT** (40 W. 25th St.; 741-8520), on the main floor of the Showplace (a multi-dealer antique center that is one of the fancier outposts in the burgeoning Chelsea flea-market district), a sterling silver men's demi-hunter from 1916 has its numerals enamelled in black on the bezel and its hands half hidden behind a small glass window ($725). A cushion-shaped Illinois from the same era, also in sterling, still has its original radium numbers and hands, though their glowing days are long past ($380); a pink-gold cocktail watch, with curiously curved lugs that date from the Second World War, has a small square face, a smattering of tiny rubies and diamonds, and an aura of quiet glamour ($350).

Things are more lighthearted at **A QUESTION OF TIME** (54 MacDougal St.; 475-3820), where an assortment of jaunty Accutron Bulova Space View watches from the late nineteen-sixties awaits admirers of the Jetsons ($300 to $400). With a movement halfway between mechanical and quartz, the Space View is famous for its revolutionary tuning-fork activation and its transparent case, which reveals an anatomy lesson of brightly hued, busily humming innards. (They're no picnic to repair, though the shop's owner says he is an old hand at doing so.) The store also has a fifty-year-old pink-faced chrome watch that shows Disney's Cinderella dressed in a cerulean ball gown ($125). Although her original glass-slipper box is nowhere in sight, she looks quite capable of spreading her magical good fortune from one century to the next.

—Lynn Yaeger



EDEL RODRIGUEZ

never really fit. And as a new recording, "Dusk," exhibits, it still doesn't. Hill continues to compose gripping tunes that mess gleefully with harmony and rhythm while favoring cloudier jazz atmospheres. Luckily for him, he's got a smart group of younger players itching to take all this on, including trumpeter **Ron Horton**, saxophonist **Marty Erlich**, and drummer **Nasheet Waits.** Dining.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—May 16: No one's ever called pianist **Joey Calderazzo** a reticent player; at times, even eighty-eight keys seem frustratingly few for this feisty improviser. At least he's found rhythm players who can keep up with him and then some: bassist **John Patitucci** and super drummer **Jeff (Tain) Watts.**

SWEET BASIL
88 Seventh Ave. S., at Bleecker St. (242-1785)—The Japanese pianist **Yosuke Yamashita** (here through May 14) just can't wait to open his Pandora's box of dervish rhythms, multi-register passages, and razor-edged grooves, all of which set him apart from the conservatives of the jazz world. Dining.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—Through May 14: While not exactly the contemporary versions of Lester Young and Billie Holiday, tenor saxophonist **Houston Person** and vocalist **Etta Jones** make fetching music together, a tradition that started more than twenty-five years ago. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—**"Painters in Paris: 1895-1950"** presents more than a hundred modernist works from the museum's collection, by thirty-eight masters. Through Dec. 31. ♦ **"Walker Evans,"** a comprehensive retrospective, the photographer's first. Through May 14. ♦ **"The World of Scholar's Rocks."** Through Aug. 20. ♦ **"Tilman Riemenschneider: Master Sculptor of the Late Middle Ages."** Through May 14. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—MOMA goes multiplex with **"Making Choices,"** the twenty-four-part show, all concentrating on works made between 1920 and 1960. As they did for the recent "People, Places and Things," the curators have drawn exclusively from the museum's extensive holdings to mount the show. But, while that sprawling trilogy was a little disjointed, this show offers a series of tightly focussed exhibitions, several devoted to a single artist. A small gallery on the first floor features the lush photography of Man Ray; its larger next-door neighbor displays architectural drawings and models by Louis Kahn. On the second floor the succinctly titled "War" pairs photographs from the U.S. naval archives with Picasso's gut-wrenching grisaille painting "The Charnel House," from 1945, which echoes his masterpiece "Guernica." After that, happening upon the installation of etchings by still-life maestro Giorgio Morandi is strange, but soothing. Closing, in stages, on Aug. 22, Sept. 19, and Sept. 26. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 10:30 to 5:45; Fridays, 10:30 to 8:15.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—Selections from the permanent collection are on display. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 9 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 9 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—The latest Biennial exhibition would be a greater pleasure—the installation is thoughtfully paced, spare, and clear—if only there were more art works that held one's attention. Instead we get a "Stepford Wives" version of contemporary art: most everything looks placid, numb, and earnestly mediocre. Exceptions include a sprawling mobile by the whimsical Sarah

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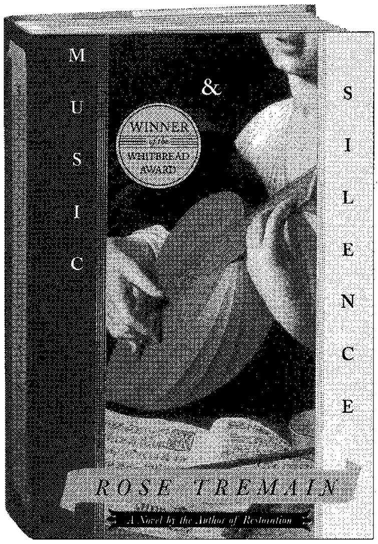
WHITBREAD AWARD WINNERS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—Merle Rubin, *Los Angeles Times*

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—Paula Friedman, *Chicago Tribune*

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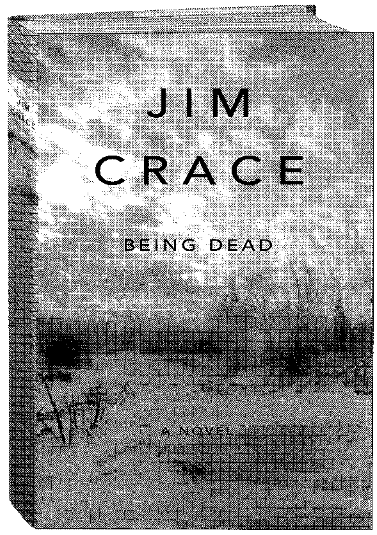
Author of the 1998 Whitbread
Winner, *Quarantine*



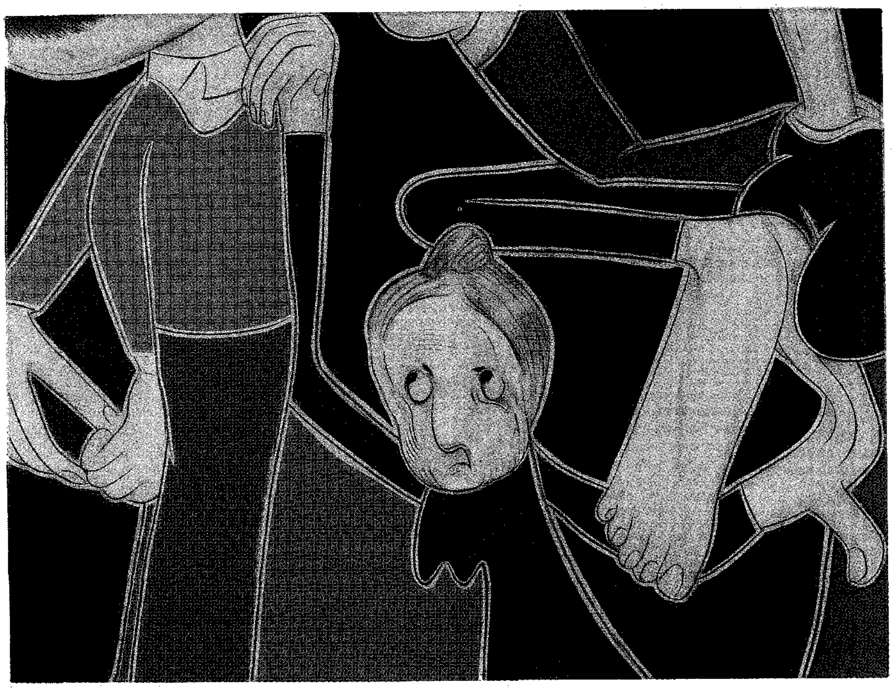
"**Sumptuously exact . . .** The naked daring of Crace's subject matter seems to have produced prose more majestic and assured than in any of his previous novels."
—Carey Harrison
San Francisco Chronicle

"An exquisitely gentle and unsentimental tale on the evolution of love."
—Jonathan Levi, *Los Angeles Times*

"**An insidious storyteller . . .** Crace is one of Britain's most remarkable writers, and has been for the past couple of decades."
—Richard Eder, *The New York Times*

*—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX



"Leaving the Spoiled Nest," by Elliott Green, at Postmasters.

Sze, a trio of John Currin's odes to Wasp pulchritude, and Robert Gober's ghoulish sink sculptures, in which faucets are replaced by cadaverous legs. Painting, despite its current liveliness, is poorly represented, which may be why the video installations, especially those by Doug Aitken and Shirin Neshat, make such a strong impression. Through June 4. (Open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6; Thursdays, 1 to 9.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (288-0700)—In the basement galleries, **"Michelangelo to Picasso"** offers a pair of very unevenly matched exhibitions of Old Master and modernist draftsmanship, both on loan from the Albertina Museum in Vienna. As you might expect, the Old Master selections are breathtaking, including figure studies by all three of the High Renaissance's franchise players, along with masterworks by Rembrandt, Poussin, and Tiepolo. The four Dürers include the ferociously meticulous "Head of an Old Man," which would be on any sensible short list of the greatest portrait drawings of all time. By comparison, the modernist side is a debacle. With a few exceptions (Van Gogh, Schiele), what's on view seems like either an indictment of the century or an institutional plea for help: philanthropy, *bitte!* Through June 18. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6; Sundays, 1 to 6.)

GALLERIES–UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

FREDERICK EDWIN CHURCH
What spectacular effect did Church not paint? Waterfalls, meteors, arctic shipwrecks, and Old World ruins, not to mention tranquil sunsets in every latitude—they're all here, in a substantial retrospective designed to commemorate the centennial of the artist's death. Church's most conspicuous skill—his tireless descriptive exactitude—has long since passed from fashion, but his works look remarkably fresh, glowing with the cadmium yellows and arsenic greens that may have poisoned him. Among the show's many highlights, the peak is his view of Cotopaxi, the Ecuadorean volcano shown spilling smoke and ash across a devastated landscape. If its visionary empiricism seems awkwardly perched between the Book of Revelations and *National Geographic,* it's worth remembering that it was painted during the middle of a far grimmer, more devastating eruption: the American Civil War. Through July 15. (Berry-Hill, 11 E. 70th St. 744-2300.)

LUCIAN FREUD
At the end of his Metropolitan retrospective in 1995, it looked as if the great English realist had decided to close his career with a cycle of "big works"—garish, portentously obese nudes that were, in effect, self-caricatures. Happily, he's moved on. Apart from a few stagy moments (a pair of male legs hiding under a bed, for example), these thirty-five recent pieces are triumphantly simple. The drama is all in Freud's brush, which registers surfaces—above all, the lichenous sheen of skin—with a supercharged fidelity that would have impressed Eakins or Courbet. Through May 19. (Acquavella, 18 E. 79th St. 734-6300.)

ANNE HARRIS
The artist's New York début consists almost entirely of self-portraits, though she can hardly be faulted for narcissism. Harris looks into the mirror and sees a bloated, lecherous creature, whose glittering eyes, teeth, and nipples emerge from backgrounds of milky, warm light. She's a sort of vampiric hausfrau, a stay-at-home sister to Lisa Yuskavage's satirical nymphets, or perhaps a granddaughter of the camisoled tarts that George Grosz painted in Weimar Berlin. The show also includes a few tiny paintings of newborn children, which highlight the artist's impressive draftsmanship. Through May 13. (DC Moore, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 247-2111.)

Short List

DIANA HOROWITZ
MB Modern, 41 E. 57th St. 371-3444.
Through May 20.

FRANCIS PICABIA
Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 988-1623. Through June 3.

GALLERIES–CHELSEA

D-L ALVAREZ
As visitors enter this small "Sculpture Garden," they are greeted by a hanging tree limb in a carefully tailored, close-fitting knit costume. Elsewhere, a tiny video screen shows a montage of park benches, and an almost invisible lacy paper spiderweb hangs in a corner. Though the theme is clear, and some of the work is strong, the show has a diffuse, disconnected feel, more like a tour of neighborhood lawn sculptures than a visit to a unified, civic-minded garden. Through May 20. (Eller, 529 W. 20th St. 206-6411.)

WILLIE COLE
Cole, the young artist whose dramatically iron-scorched canvases earned him an individual MOMA show two years ago, has moved from the laundry to the bath. The Kohler Company's artist-in-residence program offered the impetus and all the plumbing the artist could carry away; Cole took a saw to his benefactor's products (bathroom fixtures) and assembled a group of astonishingly sexy dolls with gleaming porcelain torsos and brass appendages arranged above round, dimpled knees, cut from the bend in a pipe. One Ganesh-like figure greets arrivals facing the window: departing viewers may notice his plumber's butt. Through May 26. (Alexander and Bonin, 132 Tenth Ave., at 18th St. 367-7474.)

STEVE DI BENEDETTO
Willfully, even joyfully, irresolute, DiBenedetto's small canvases are packed with splintered motifs—wheels and pie charts, drips and splatters, tentacles and helicopters. The result is a kind of kaleidoscopic congestion: the images are murky, but the palette (pure reds, yellows, blues, and greens) couldn't be sweeter if the paintings were made of Jell-O. In older painters like Polke and Richter, this festively clotted look comes across as a cosmic proposition. With DiBenedetto it seems personal: Look at my imagination, he seems to be saying, it's a mess. Through May 27. (Baumgartner, 418 W. 15th St. 633-2276.)

YEARDLEY LEONARD
Leonard's horizontal-stripe paintings seem at first like an abstract painter's homage to the landscape tradition, but their intense colors owe more to currently fashionable seventies styles. In one, a particolored base (navy, red, royal blue, yellow, purple, orange, red, etc.) is followed up by sky tones (three shades of blue in short order, then gray, white, and another blue). They're beautiful canvases, and, perhaps intentionally, already as dated as the retro striped T-shirts on this spring's sale racks. Through May 27. (Dee Glasoe, 529 W. 20th St. 924-7545.)

ETOY / ELLIOTT GREEN
Contemporary art's most established Internet presence finally descends from cyberspace and enters into a gallery. Outside, the ensemble has parked its world headquarters on the street: a shipping container converted to bunks and cubicles. Inside, graphically intense etoy stock certificates cover the walls, many already sold to a new crossbreed collector-investor. Evidence of "Toywar"—the recently resolved courtroom battle to defend the etoy.com domain name from legal assault by the on-line store Etoys—is everywhere, and it's clear that the conflict couldn't have been better artistic fodder. Members of the etoy.CREW preside, sporting their distinctive short haircuts and business suits with orange vests. Through May 10. / Alkyd-and-oil canvases devoted to the turbulent inner lives of cartoon figures. Opens May 13. (Postmasters, 459 W. 19th St. 727-3323.)

Short List

KATHARINA FRITSCH
Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 243-0200.
Through June 23.

PIPILOTTI RIST
Luhring Augustine, 531 W. 24th St.
206-9100. Through May 27.

MAKI TAMURA
AC Project Room, 453 W. 17th St. 645-4970.
Through May 13.

ANDREA ZITTEL
Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 627-6000.
Through May 27.

GALLERIES–DOWNTOWN

GHADA AMER
While his neighbors flee, lemminglike, for Chelsea, Jeffrey Deitch threatens to unseat Larry Gagosian as franchise king of the New York art world. His third SoHo venue is a beaut, skylit, three-tiered and housed in a former lumberyard. From a distance—

and there's no shortage here—Amer's canvases resemble Abstract Expressionist paintings. But what masquerade as splattered skeins of paint are in fact embroidered images of women copied from porn magazines. Before the painted background was usually monochrome—the money shot was the needlework—but here the artist gets drippy with it, more Pat Steir than Pollock. Through May 27. (Deitch Projects, 18 Wooster St. 343-7300.)

BONNIE COLLURA
These drawings and sculptures, whose cultural references range from Bernini's St. Ludovica to Disney's Snow White, could take hours to decipher, but their visual impact is immediate. The artist's idiosyncratic sculptural materials—a combination of foam, putty, and metal, among others—now include the cellophane grass used to line Easter baskets. Just as Easter conflates the Resurrection with kitschy cottontails, Collura's recombinant narratives blend high and low, morphing the familiar into the new. Through May 26. (Lehman Maupin, 39 Greene St. 965-0753.)

ZHANG HUAN
Cross Carolee Schneemann's "Meat Joy" with nudist Tai Chi and you get a sense of "My America," performed by this Chinese artist and fifty-six volunteers at the Seattle Art Museum last November. At one point the participants fill rows of scaffolding like statuary on shelves; later they violently pelt Zhang with bread as he sits impassively on a stool, a willing victim. The action is documented in an edited videotape (one hour reduced to five minutes) and a group of large-scale color photographs that convey both sanctity and silliness. Through May 27. (Deitch Projects, 75 Grand St. 226-4370.)

"RECONSTRUCTING ABSTRACTION"
The dealer Mitchell Algus is a high-school science teacher, but his best experiment is this small storefront gallery tucked away on the outskirts of SoHo. Since 1992 he has devoted his program to artists whose heyday has passed and whose work is all but unknown to a new generation of artists. This show, featuring Gerald Hayes, Judith Murray, Deborah Remington, and Ted Stamm, examines the influence of Russian Constructivism on abstraction in the early seventies. Aside from Stamm, whose shaped canvas owes a great deal to both Mangold and Stella, the works resist categorization, which may explain why fame has resisted them. Through May 13. (Algus Gallery, 25 Thompson St. 966-1758.)

Short List

ROBERT SMITHSON
Ace, 275 Hudson St. 255-5599. Through May 12.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S
May 10: Nineteenth-century furniture and decorative art works. ♦ May 10-11: An impressive sale of Impressionist and modern art, including important works by Monet (paintings from his Rouen Cathedral and water-lilies series), Matisse, Renoir, and Picasso. ♦ May 12: A single-owner sale of fine English furniture, porcelain, and silver. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 606-7000.)

CHRISTIE'S
May 10: The conclusion of the house's auction of twentieth-century art, in addition to a sale of modern Japanese paintings. ♦ May 16-17: Contemporary art, with the opening night featuring pieces by Sigmar Polke, Charles Ray, and Eric Fischl. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 636-2000.)

CHRISTIE'S EAST
May 10: Arms and armor. ♦ May 16: European decorative art works. (219 E. 67th St. 606-0430.)

PHILLIPS
The New York branch of this auction house has been quiet for several months, but it springs back to life with an impressive two-day sale of Impressionist and modern paintings and sculptures, held not at its own premises on East Seventy-ninth Street, but rather at the American Craft Museum. The offerings include high-ticket paintings by Monet, Renoir, and Cézanne, as well as notable pieces by such second-tier eminences as Jawlensky, de Lempicka, and Schmidt-Rottluff. Of unusual interest among the opening night's allurements is Kazimir Malevich's "Suprematist Composition" (circa 1919-20), a seminal early example of non-objective abstraction. (40 W. 53rd St. May 11-12. For more information, call 570-4830.)

SWANN
Works on paper. (104 E. 25th St. 254-4710. May 11.)

INTERNATIONAL FINE ART FAIR
An assemblage of sixty-five international dealers of paintings, drawings, and sculpture. (7th Regiment Armory, Park Ave. at 66th St. May 12-17, with a benefit preview on May 11. For information, call 642-8572.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

JESSE ALEXANDER / SID AVERY
Jesse Alexander began chronicling Formula One in the early fifties, and had a taste for the sport's more elegant races—Le Mans, the Monaco Grand Prix. His black-and-whites of cars, drivers, and paparazzi are mysteriously still and unblurred, as though the film were impervious to speed. In the same era, Sid Avery was taking "casual" shots of screen stars with their cars. This collection looks like the outtakes from a star-studded B-flick—Rock Hudson, wearing nothing but white tennis shorts, hoses down his Olds; Lawrence Welk stands in a lot full of shiny vehicles. The prints are indisputably fine. Both shows through May 20. (Staley-Wise, 560 Broadway. 966-6223.)

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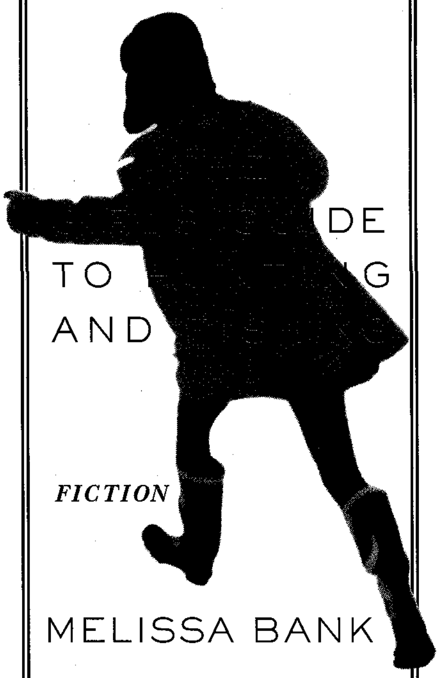

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—*Los Angeles Times*

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—*Entertainment Weekly*

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NOW IN PAPERBACK

TERRY EVANS
The Kansas-born Evans photographs her native state’s amber waves of grain and comparatively negligible signs of human life on the land. She has found her ideal subject in the ruins of the Joliet Arsenal, half reclaimed by the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. These landscapes, many aerial, dwarf a series of more scholarly botanical studies. Through May 20. (Richardson, 560 Broadway. 343-1255.)

NATHAN LYONS
Like Robert Frank, Lyons finds telling clues of our culture in grittily forlorn places: a boarded-up building postered with election signs, a sad-looking apartment for rent. Yet his lonesome documents of twentieth-century America are enriched by generous composition and humor. One image turns an enormous Big Doughnut Drive-In sign, shaped like the pastry, into a philosophical meditation on iconography, space, and roadside cuisine. A photograph of Arabic graffiti, next to which, written in another hand, is the word “What?,” seems, like much of Lyons’s work, to question what is being seen and said. Through June 3. (Greenberg, 120 Wooster St. 334-0010.)

"SHOOTBACK"
The children and teen-agers whose work is shown here were given cameras through a youth organization in the Nairobi slum of Mathare. For the last three years, they have taken pictures of their lives, from joyous soccer games to babies playing unattended on piles of garbage. The prints, most of which are large-scale color, offer a vivid and captivating inside view of a world not often documented. Accompanying captions, written by the photographers themselves, further underscore a remarkable sensitivity and awareness amidst the grim realities of unrelenting poverty. Through June 3. (Staff U.S.A., 495 Broadway. 925-9700.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1130 Fifth Ave., at 94th St. (860-1777)—Nathan Lyons’s **“Riding First Class on the Titanic.”** Through June 18. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10-5; Fridays, 10-8; Saturdays and Sundays, 10-6.)

Short List

ROBERT BORDEAU
Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St.
750-7070. Through June 17.

KURT KRANZ
Gallery 292, at 120 Wooster St. 431-0292.
Through June 3.

MARK SHAW
Meyerowitz, 580 Broadway. 625-3434.
Through May 20.

See the museum listings for photography exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
The company closes its season with an unusual benefit performance in which three notable tenors are featured, each in a different operatic act (with James Levine conducting throughout): Act II of “Andrea Chénier,” with Daniella Dessì, Plácido Domingo, Nikolai Putilin, and Kim Josephson; Act IV of “Carmen,” with Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, José Carreras, and Gino Quilico; and Act III of “Turandot,” with Jane Eaglen, Patricia Racette, Luciano Pavarotti, and Roberto Scandiuzzi. (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000. May 11 at 7.)

NEW YORK NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE
The modern-music group offers a staging of John Eaton’s musical-theatre piece “Don Quixote,” in which “acrobatic and dancing clarinettist” Jean Kopperud is assigned the title role and flutist Jayn Rosenfeld portrays his long-suffering sidekick. (Miller Theatre, Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 854-7799. May 9-10 at 8.)

OPERAWORKS
Two works are running in repertoire. May 12-13 and May 15 at 8: “The Ballad of Baby Doe.” ♦ May 16 at 8: “Salome.” (Raw Space Theatre, 529 W. 42nd St. For information about tickets, call 873-9531.)

BROOKLYN PHILHARMONIC
Messiaen’s late opera “Saint François d’Assise,” unveiled in 1983, displays the composer’s signature penchant for medieval spirituality, his obsession with birdcalls, and his rhapsodic lyricism. In this concert performance of three of the opera’s eight tableaux, Robert Spano conducts a cast headed by soprano Heidi Grant Murphy (as the Angel) and baritone David Wilson-Johnson (in the title role). In French, with English supertitles. (Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. May 13 at 8.)

LA GRAN SCENA
This time around, the all-male troupe *en travestie* presents operatic murder scenes through the centuries as their composers (Handel, Puccini, and Saint-Saëns among them) surely did not imagine them. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 840-2824. May 13 at 8 and May 14 at 7.)

"DR. MIRACLE"
Bizet’s fifty-minute opera, composed in 1857, when he was nineteen, receives an English-language family performance from the St. Luke’s Chamber Ensemble and guest singers. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. May 14 at 2. For information about tickets, call 594-6100.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Colin Davis conducts an all-Mozart program that comprises the Symphonies No. 28 and No. 38, as well as the Piano Concerto in E-Flat Major (K. 482, with Alfred Brendel as soloist). (Avery Fisher Hall. 875-5030. May 11-13 at 8.)

MET ORCHESTRA
Performing a program of operatic excerpts that includes arias by Mozart and Stravinsky (featuring soprano Sylvia McNair), excerpts from Berg’s “Lulu” (with soprano Jennifer Welch), and Wagner’s “A Faust Overture” and “Prelude and Liebestod” from “Tristan und Isolde.” James Levine conducts. (Carnegie Hall. 247-7800. May 10 at 8.)

ABSOLUTE ENSEMBLE
The Estonian-born conductor Kristjan Järvi leads the ninety-minute, rock-influenced “Architectonics” by his compatriot Erkki-Sven Tüür. (Miller Theatre, Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 854-7799. May 12 at 8.)

VOICES OF ASCENSION
Dennis Keene directs four of the composer’s choral motets in an all-Bach concert that also includes harpsichord, organ, and solo vocal pieces. (Church of the Ascension, Fifth Ave. at 10th St. 358-1469. May 13 at 8.)

DESSOFF CHOIRS
A concert performance, directed by Kent Tritle, of Menotti’s madrigal comedy “The Unicorn, the Gorgon, and the Manticore,” in addition to the première of Marshall Coid’s “Whitman Cantata.” (Alice Tully Hall. 875-5050. May 13 at 8.)

NEXUS ARTS
Menotti’s “The Unicorn, the Gorgon, and the Manticore” gets two more airings, this time with Claudia Dumschat conducting a staged production. (Church of the Transfiguration, 1 E. 29th St. 684-4174. May 14 at 4 and May 15 at 8.)

JUPITER SYMPHONY
Jens Nygaard conducts three benefit all-Bach concerts, each comprising the A-Major Keyboard Concerto, A-Minor Violin Concerto, “Brandenburg” Concerto No. 2, and Cantata No. 53. (Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church, 152 W. 66th St. May 15 at 2 and 7 and May 16 at 8. For information about tickets, call 799-1259.)

NEW AMSTERDAM SINGERS
The chorus performs works by American composers, including Copland, Barber, Irving Fine, and Paul Alan Levi. Clara Longstreth directs. (St. Peter’s Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. May 15 and May 17 at 8. Tickets at the door.)

RECITALS

AVALON STRING QUARTET
The foursome plays Wolf's "Italian Serenade," Brahms's Piano Quintet (with Gilbert Kalish), and Berg's "Lyric Suite" (with soprano Lucy Shelton). (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 501-3330. May 10 at 7:30.)

AMERICAN ART SONGS
Four composers—Ricky Ian Gordon, Daron Hagen, John Musto, and Ned Rorem—take turns at the piano accompanying song cycles they have written (all but Mr. Rorem's are premières). The singers are sopranos Ashley Putnam and Amy Burton, mezzo-soprano Margaret Lattimore, and baritone Kurt Ollmann. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100. May 10 at 8.)

BARGEMUSIC
May 11 at 7:30: Pianist Anne-Marie McDermott performs a prelude and fugue by Mendelssohn and is joined by her sisters Kerry (a violinist) and Maureen (a cellist) for Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Piano Trio. Dvořák's Piano Quartet in E-Flat Major (Op. 87), with violist Paul Neubauer, completes the program. ♦ May 12 at 7:30: The McDermotts and Mr. Neubauer perform Piazzolla's "Le Grand Tango" and Mendelssohn's D-Minor Piano Trio, among other works. ♦ May 13 at 7:30 and May 14 at 4: Violinist Joseph Silverstein and pianist William Wolfram perform Clara Schumann's Three Romances (Op. 22) and are joined by cellist Fred Sherry in piano trios by Beethoven (the "Ghost") and Brahms (in B Major). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-4061.)

"YADDO 100"
The upstate arts colony is celebrating its centennial by hosting a concert series at the Ethical Culture Society that highlights works by composers who have worked there, performed by musicians from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. May 11 at 8: Works by George Tsontakis, Dan Coleman, Chen Yi, Chou Wen-Chung, Aaron Jay Kernis, Daniel Brubaker, Virgil Thomson, George Perle, and Wallingford Riegger. ♦ May 13 at 8: Works for small chamber combinations, by Steven Burke, Sebastian Currier, Michael Torke, Leonard Bernstein, Barbara Kolb, and Ned Rorem. (2 W. 64th St. For information about tickets, call 592-4156.)

JOAN MORRIS AND WILLIAM BOLCOM
The wife-and-husband singer-and-pianist duo remain sui generis as interpreters of American popular classics. In this recital, they offer chestnuts and less familiar items by Cole Porter, Eubie Blake, and many others. (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 570-3949. May 12 at 8.)

ORION STRING QUARTET
The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center is sponsoring this foursome's traversal of Beethoven's sixteen quartets, distributed among six concerts in the course of two weeks. May 12 at 8: The Quartets in D Major (Op. 18, No. 3), F Major (Op. 135), and F Major (Op. 59, No. 1). ♦ May 14 at 5: The Quartets in F Major (Op. 18, No. 1) and E Minor (Op. 59, No. 2), in addition to the "Grosse Fuge." ♦ May 16 at 7:30: The Quartets in C Minor (Op. 18, No. 4), E-Flat Major (Op. 127), and C Major (Op. 59, No. 3). (Alice Tully Hall. For information about free tickets, which are required, call 875-5788. The series continues through May 23.)

DAWN UPSHAW AND THE KRONOS STRING QUARTET
The soprano is featured in a program of international diversity that draws from traditions as varied of those of Hungary, Egypt, India, and the United States. (Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, Park Ave. at 84th St. May 13 at 8. For information about tickets, call 721-6500.)

VLADIMIR SPIVAKOV
The violinist plays the chaconne from Bach's Partita No. 2, and pianist Kun Woo Paik assists him in sonatas by Brahms (in D Minor) and Franck, as well as in Pärt's "Spiegel im Spiegel." (Carnegie Hall. 247-7800. May 13 at 8.)

GUARNERI QUARTET
The ensemble performs string quartets by Mozart (in B-Flat Major, K. 458), Mendelssohn (his "Four

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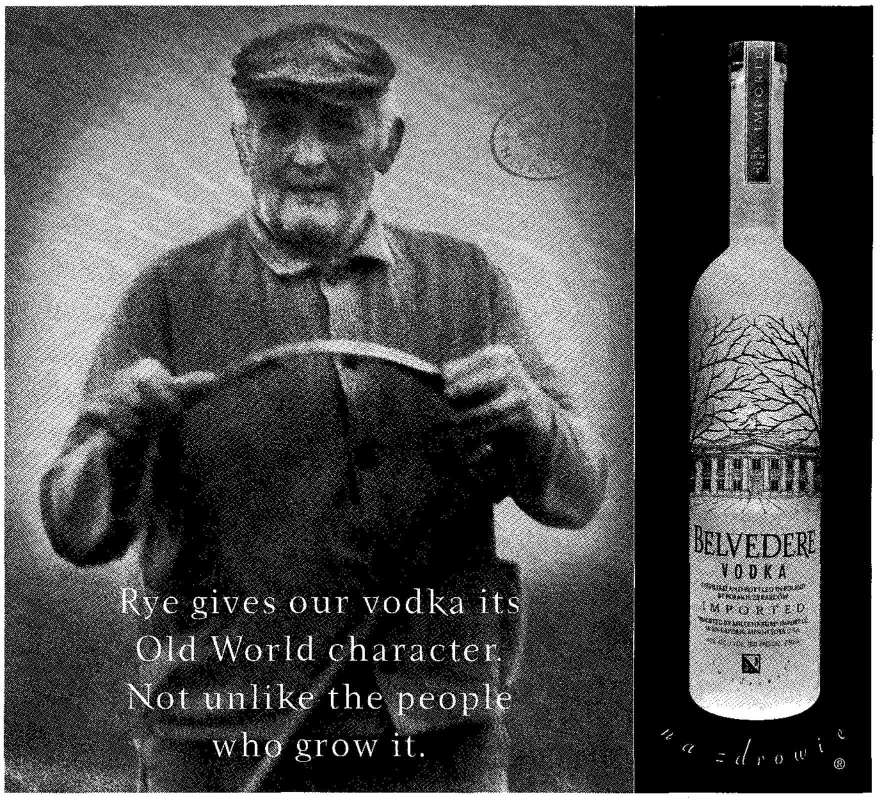

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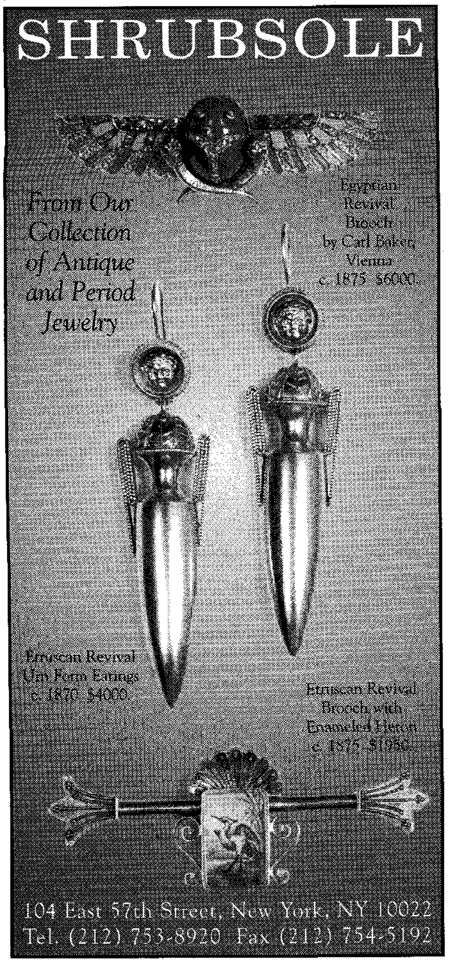
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Pieces," Op. 81), and Debussy. (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 570-3949. May 13 at 8.)

VLADIMIR FELTSMAN
The pianist performs Haydn's Sonata in E-Flat Major (Hob. XVI:49), Brahms's "Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel," and several works by Chopin (including his Fourth Ballade). (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100. May 13 at 8.)

NEW YORK'S ENSEMBLE FOR EARLY MUSIC
Presenting a benefit program of medieval and Renaissance works that explore the theme of motherhood. (St. James Chapel, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 280-0330. May 13 at 8 and May 14 at 3.)

MATTHIAS GOERNE
The magisterial German baritone performs songs by Schubert and Eisler, bracingly presented in alternating sets. Pianist Eric Schneider assists. (Alice Tully Hall. 875-5050. May 14 at 2.)

PAUL JACOBS
A day after graduating from the Curtis Institute, this twenty-three-year-old organist embarks on a performance of Bach's complete organ works, spread over fourteen evenings. May 14: The Preludes and Fugues in G Major (BWV 541) and C Minor (BWV 546) and the Trio in E-Flat Major, among other works. ♦ May 15: A program including the G-Minor Fantasia and Fugue (BWV 542) and nine chorale preludes. ♦ May 16: The C-Major Concerto after Vivaldi, C-Minor Trio, and other works. (Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, Madison Ave. at 73rd St. Admission by contribution. Evenings at 8. Through May 27.)

CHAMBER PLAYERS OF THE LEAGUE/I.S.C.M.
The contemporary-music organization presents pianist Eliza Garth and the Atlantic String Quartet in performances of Judith Weir's "Distance and Enchantment" (a piano quartet), Charles Wuorinen's Piano Quintet, and pieces by Morris Rosenzweig and Copland. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 501-3330. May 15 at 8.)

I MUSICI DI SAN CASSIANO
The period-instrument ensemble is joined by countertenor Bejun Mahta for cantatas by Handel and Alessandro Scarlatti, with Bradley Brookshire directing from the harpsichord. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 501-3330. May 16 at 7:30.)

CHAMBER MUSIC AT THE Y
Violinists Jaime Laredo and Ida Kavafian, violists Michael Tree and Cynthia Phelps, and cellists Janos Starker and Sharon Robinson team up for a concert comprising Strauss's Sextet from "Capriccio," Mozart's G-Minor String Quintet, and Schubert's C-Major String Quintet. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100. May 16-17 at 8.)

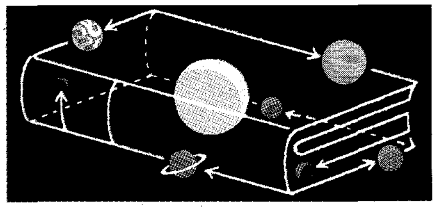
ABOVE AND BEYOND

READINGS
May 10 at 7: By poet Nikki Giovanni, from her work. (Spoonbill & Sugartown Booksellers, 218 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn. No tickets necessary.) ♦ May 11 at 7:30: By A. B. Yehoshua, from his novel "A Journey to the End of the Millennium." (Garfield Temple, Eighth Ave. at Garfield Pl., Brooklyn. For more information, call 718-783-3075.) ♦ May 12 at 7: By Thomas Beller, Gerry Howard, Clara Bingham, Eoghan Mahony, and others, from the late Robert Bingham's novel, "Lightning on the Sun." (Whitney Museum of American Art, Madison Ave. at 75th St. For reservations, which are required, call 782-9796.) ♦ May 15 at 8: By Jayne Anne Phillips and Norman Rush, from their fiction. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100.)

TALKS
May 11 at 6:30: *New Yorker* writer John Lahr interviews Ralph Blumenthal, author of "Stork Club." (New-York Historical Society, 2 W. 77th St., at Central Park W. 873-3400.) ♦ May 16 at 7: Dr. Ronald Crystal, a researcher at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University, discusses gene therapy. (American Museum of Natural History, Central Park W. at 79th St. For more information, call 769-5176.)

BOOK CURRENTS

An All-Star Cast



The inner moons of Jupiter, photographed so clearly by the Galileo spacecraft a few weeks ago, would have been invisible to Galileo himself when he observed their larger cousins through his telescope in 1610 and deduced from their motion that the Earth orbited the sun. His discovery led to pressure from the Vatican and an eventual recantation of the **DIALOGUE CONCERNING THE TWO CHIEF WORLD SYSTEMS** (still in print, from University of California Press). In **BROTHER ASTRONOMER: THE ADVENTURES OF A VATICAN SCIENTIST** (McGraw-Hill), astronomer Guy Consolmagno writes that the persecution of Galileo was an uncharacteristic lapse. Consolmagno should know: he works at the Vatican observatory, one of the world's oldest facilities, and one that offers him more scientific freedom than "when NASA grants were paying [his] bills."

With royal rather than papal support, the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe founded his own scientific community on the private island of Hven at the end of the sixteenth century. John Robert Christianson, in **ON TYCHO'S ISLAND** (Cambridge), details how Brahe's vision encompassed everything from instrument design to large feasts at which scientists drank wine and amused each other with poetry recitations. A sense of community proved useful in successive centuries, as Eli Maor explains in **JUNE 8, 2004: VENUS IN TRANSIT** (Princeton). In the eighteenth century, the transit of Venus—a rare event in which the planet is visible on the solar surface—was crucial to those interested in the exact distance between the sun and the Earth. It obsessed stargazers worldwide, who both competed with one another and pooled their data. Now that this distance has been calculated, those interested in the next transit can sit back and enjoy the six-hour spectacle.

—*Leo Carey*

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

Books.
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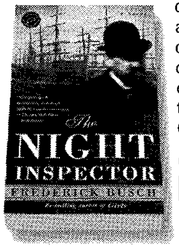
We Know Some Interesting Characters

THE NIGHT INSPECTOR

by Frederick Busch



A maimed Civil War veteran returns to New York City, determined to make a fresh start for himself as a financial speculator. Forced to wear a mask to conceal his disfigurement, he lives among the city's rabble and befriends a deputy inspector of customs—named Herman Melville—and a prostitute who involves him in a complex venture with Civil War origins. (Ballantine Books)

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AT END OF DAY

by George V. Higgins

With iron fists, mobsters McKeach and Cistaro have ruled organized crime in Boston for thirty years. But their reign of corruption is about to come to a screeching halt in this intricate thriller by the author of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, completed just prior to his death. (Harcourt Brace)

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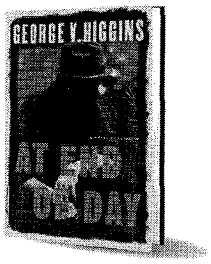

BEING DEAD

by Jim Crace

When a husband and wife's murdered corpses are found together in the dunes of Baritone Bay, even death can't deny the love that existed between them. As the story dwells on the details of their physical demise, the fictional lives of two middle-aged zoologists is beautifully recreated. (FSG)

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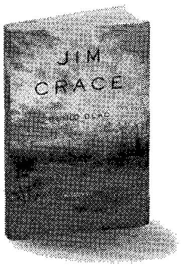

SWIMMING SWEET ARROW

by Maureen Gibbon

Leaving their carefree high school days behind, best friends Vangie and June become more deeply involved with the cruel, violent men in their lives as they embark on a dizzying downward spiral. This dangerous pattern continues until Vangie, in a bid for a better life, takes stock of the bad decisions she has made. (Little, Brown)

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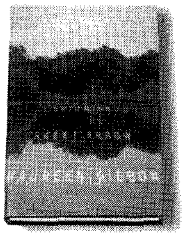

MUSIC & SILENCE

by Rose Tremain

In her Whitbread Award-winning novel, the author of *Restoration* pens a provocative historic tale of good and evil. When a young English lute player joins Denmark's Royal Orchestra and is forced to perform in a freezing cellar, he learns that courtly life in 1629 is not as glamorous—or nearly as innocent—as he imagined. (FSG)

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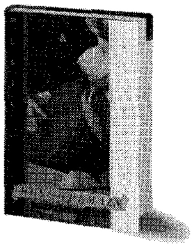
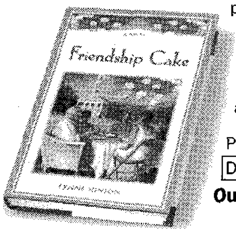


FRIENDSHIP CAKE

by Lynne Hinton



Good food and strong faith complement each other perfectly in a novel that celebrates five women coming together to create the Hope Springs Community Church cookbook. Actual recipes intertwine with the daily doings of family, friends and lovers in this charming tale of a North Carolina town. (HarperSanFrancisco)

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DRESSING UP FOR THE CARNIVAL

by Carol Shields

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Stone Diaries* presents a collection of short stories that spotlight her beloved characters. From tested marriages to intoxicating love affairs, from meteorologists to inventors, Shields conjures up the magic, the misery and the wisdom of everyday lives. (Viking)

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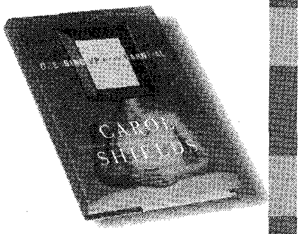

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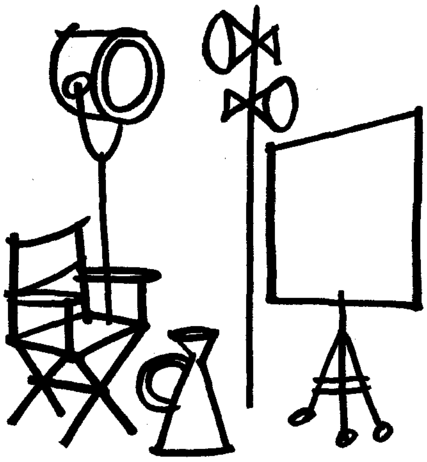


MOVIES OPENING

BATTLEFIELD EARTH
An adaptation of L. Ron Hubbard's science-fiction novel, with John Travolta and Forest Whitaker. Directed by Roger Christian. Opening May 12.

CENTER STAGE
A drama about young dancers in New York City competing for places in a prestigious troupe. Directed by Nicholas Hytner. Opening May 12.

THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE
A rerelease of Luis Buñuel's 1972 surrealist comedy. In French. Opening May 12. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

HAMLET
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening May 12.

SCREWED
Norm Macdonald plays a chauffeur who plots revenge on the ruthless old lady he works for by kidnapping her dog. With Danny DeVito and Dave Chappelle. Directed by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski. Opening May 12.

FILM NOTES

If a movie has been reviewed recently in The Current Cinema, the date of its review is given.

AMERICAN PSYCHO
Bret Easton Ellis's infamous novel, a wicked distillation of the nineteen-eighties, has finally made it to the screen; that audiences should laugh so freely at the result is an equally telling footnote to our own times. Christian Bale plays Patrick Bateman—serial killer, Wall Street whiz, and a snob so gripped by status symbols that he hyperventilates at the sight of a business card more finely printed than his own. The director, Mary Harron, shows us little of Bateman's office life, and we need more; it's a question not just of period detail but of the vital bond between his night work and his day job—between the dismemberment of corpses and the dismantling of corporations. Yet there is much to dazzle and distress here: Harron lights and arranges her characters—especially Bateman's friends—like gleaming humanoids, as if he is not alone in yielding to forces far more potent than himself. Bale is smooth and sinister; the actresses around him—Chloë Sevigny, Cara Seymour, and Samantha Mathis—seem pale and defeated by comparison, as if they know themselves to be doomed. Apart from a spree with a chainsaw, the violence of the book has been sharply toned down, (you could hardly tone it up), and some of the killing has turned into cold, outrageous comedy, with Bateman explaining his penchant for Whitney Houston and Genesis to bemused victims. With a record collection like that, he was lucky not to get it in the neck himself.—*Anthony Lane* (4/17/00) (BAM Rose Cinemas, East 85th Street, 84th Street Sixplex, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, 72nd Street East, and Village Theatre VII.)

CROUPIER
A slight and streamlined bauble from British director Mike Hodges (who did "Get Carter"), about a writer (played to stony perfection by Clive Owen) who takes a job as a roulette dealer, aiming, in the process, to write a best-seller about his experiences. The plot revolves around the big chance he takes when he rescues a mysterious woman (Alex Kingston of "ER") from a life-threatening gambling debt. The lean and twisted screenplay—nobody is what he seems—gives Hodges ample time to play with doppelgängers, duplicity, and lots of mirrors. The sombre turns of the story and low-key performances are a welcome reminder that taut moviemaking (where violence erupts unchoreographed) can be as exciting as fast-paced editing and scorching pyrotechnics.—*Bruce Diones* (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, State, and Village Theatre VII.)

DREAM OF LIGHT
Watching this two-hour-and-nineteen-minute documentary of the Spanish artist Antonio López painting a quince tree in his backyard requires a preternatural patience, and that's precisely the point. Víctor Erice, the director, eschews narration to present a quiet act of creation. We watch as López builds a frame, positions his easel, sets up a plumb line, peers, sketches, and paints. We hear the scrape of his pencil, the passing ambulances, the barking of the neighborhood dogs. His friends and family drop by to chat, it rains often, and autumn slowly fades. Will he finish the painting before the quinces fall? Erice shows how a painter and a filmmaker share the same concern for capturing verisimilitude, whether it be the afternoon light as it illuminates a yellow quince, or the meticulous process, over time, of painting that same quince. He editorializes slightly: there are many shots of televisions flickering in apartments at night, suggesting the meaningless riot of images his film is working against. Perhaps, if you have not been corrupted by too much jump-cut wizardry, you will linger happily among these beautiful images. As for the easily distracted: consider yourself warned. In Spanish.—*Michael Agger* (Film Forum.)

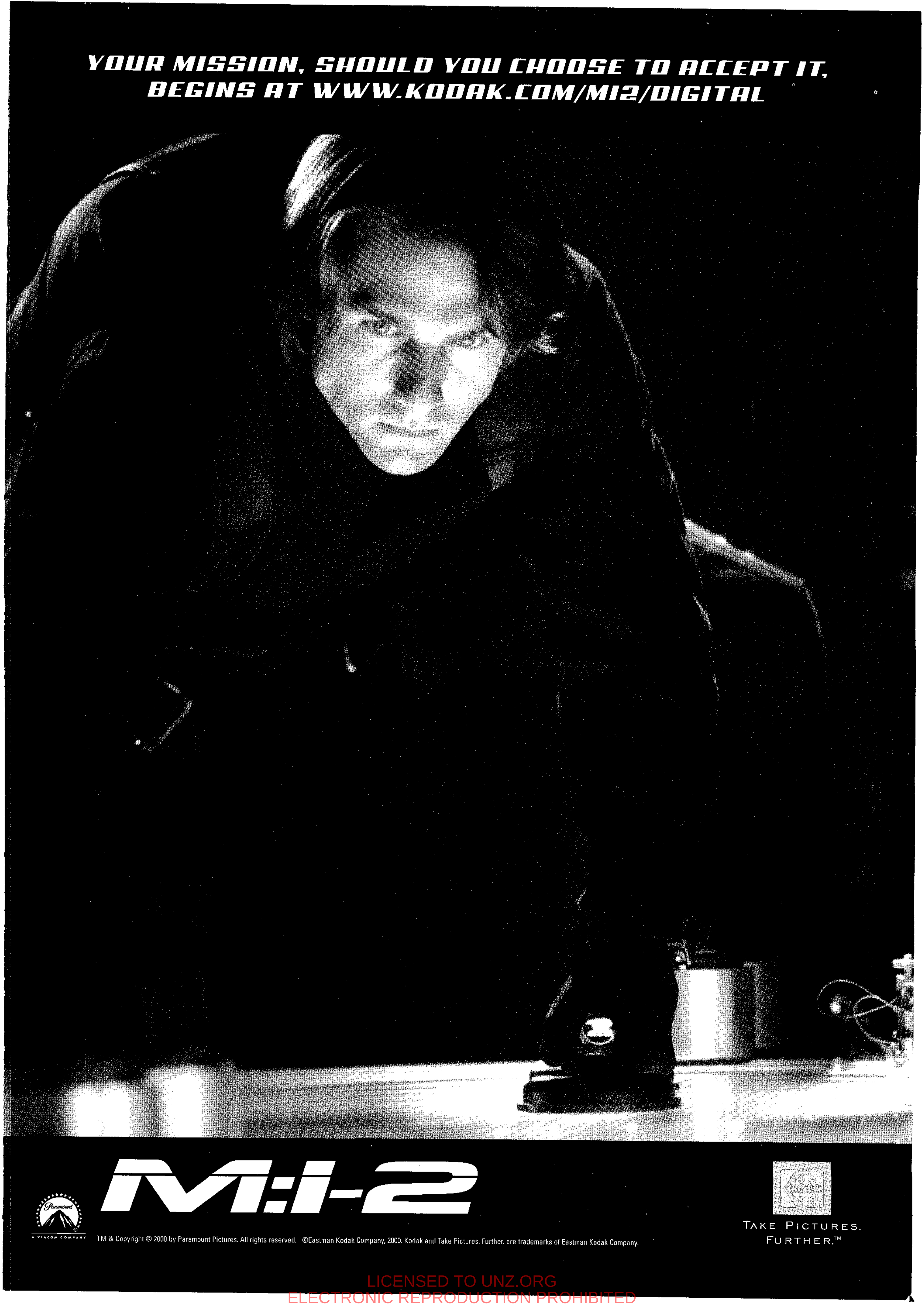
THE FILTH AND THE FURY
A new documentary about the Sex Pistols by Julien Temple, who has already made "The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle." Whether or not the band is an inexhaustible topic remains open to debate. The sight of a sullen and raw-skinned Sid Vicious sitting on a park bench and explaining how good-looking he is will not, perhaps, bear repeated viewings. The film wants Britain to be as reckless and unpredictable as its subject, but this requires a little twisting of the evidence: Britain in the mid-nineteen-seventies was bored and bungling, and, despite what Temple's riotous montage of unrest might suggest, the place was never on the verge of revolution—nothing beyond the musical, at any rate. The surviving band members (including lead singer Johnny Rotten) are filmed in silhouette, as if they were ex-criminals in the Witness Protection Program; this is known as flattery. Still, it is always diverting to watch harmlessly horrible people taking out their frustrations on one another—especially when the mask slips and they temporarily forget to be horrible. The climax of the picture is all anticlimax. Uprooted from home territory, the Sex Pistols withered in the alien soil of America. Their antics have aged badly; how odd, then, that their fistful of hits sound more essential and purgative than ever.—*A.L.* (4/3/00) (Film Forum.)

FREQUENCY
A sentimental fantasy by director Gregory Hoblit which wants to be the mother of all father-son movies. This story of an adult son (James Caviezel) who communicates via ham radio with his long-dead dad (Dennis Quaid), has all the appropriate Twilight Zone twists. When the son warns his father of his soon-to-be accidental death, Dad takes the advice and survives, and their lives change (not for the better). Hoblit's camera lingers on the actors' faces, and the aggressively emotional performances feel authentic; the film's blatant heart-tugging is earned. The plot, however, about a serial killer who eludes capture because history's been altered (and the pursuit by father and son to bring him to justice), has major-league logic flaws, even for a time-travel picture ("Time Bandits" made more sense). Still, the film moves along at an entertaining clip (thanks to Hoblit's "Hill Street Blues" experience), and there are worse things than a sappy, well-acted thriller.—*B.D.* (Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema II, East 86th Street, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, and Union Square.)

GLADIATOR
It's been many years since movie screens clanged with Roman history; directors are rightly cautious about trying to reconcile the drama of martial valor with the sight of men in short metal skirts. In the hands of Ridley Scott, however, the Empire strikes back; his new picture is strong and stirring, almost to a fault. Russell Crowe plays Maximus, a Roman general so victorious in battle and so popular with his troops that the incoming emperor, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), decides within minutes to have him killed. Maximus escapes but winds up in slavery, under the rheumy eye of Proximo (the late Oliver Reed). His prowess established in the arena, our hero returns to the Coliseum to perform his final act of revenge. The simplicity of the plot feels right; whenever the movie strays into complexity—as in the dealings between Commodus and his sister (Connie Nielsen)—it founders and slows. What you want is the games, and Scott delivers them avidly, complete with unfed tigers. The emotional and political aftertaste of the film is another matter; the way in which it encourages a lust for blood and a rage for the restoration of order will not bear much examination. When in Rome, however, you might as well cheer like the Romans. With Richard Harris, implausibly, as Marcus Aurelius.—*A.L.* (Art Greenwich Twin, Astor Plaza, Chelsea Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, New York Twin, Olympia I and II, Orpheum VII, Union Square, and Ziegfeld.)

GO TELL THE SPARTANS
In this 1978 tale of how the defense of an abandoned French garrison in Penang turns into a debacle, the director, Ted Post, and the screenwriter, Wendell Mayes (who adapted Daniel Ford's novel, "Incident at Muc Wa"), prove better at sustaining tension than at conveying the complex chaos of the Vietnam War. The action is set in 1964, a year before the U.S. escalation, and Burt Lancaster plays a major in charge of an American advisory force. He wants to perform commando-style raids even though he doesn't know the territory. And, while he's right to condemn the "static defense" strongholds (which the enemy can group against), he's less accurate when it comes to predicting where the Viet Cong will strike—less accurate, in fact, than the intricate maps and graphs of a mild, bespectacled soldier. It's a sign of the film's limitations that the quandaries it spurs you to think about are almost purely strategic. Craig Wasson plays the audience's surrogate, a naïve draftee appalled by all the wanton behavior and carnage. But Lancaster is the one who deepens the movie. He transforms a brash, hard-bitten officer into a fatigued Ajax—simultaneously dynamic and world-weary. Limping, with a stitched scar low on his forehead, he's a lewd, leathery sage, and when, finally, his corpse lies stripped in the jungle, an era of screen heroism has been defiled.—*Michael Sragow* (Walter Reade Theatre; May 10 and May 14.)

HIGH FIDELITY
A short, sharp movie from Stephen Frears, who may be trying to shake himself awake after the languors of his last film, "The Hi-Lo Country." The source is Nick Hornby's buoyant novel, which was set in North London, but the shift to Chicago feels easy, perhaps because difficulties with girls and a penchant for listing favorite pop songs are universal symptoms of male haplessness. John Cusack stars as Rob, who runs a ratty record store called Championship Vinyl; if anything, the records are more tightly packed in his apartment, which may be why his girlfriend Laura (Iben Hjejle) has just moved out. For most of the picture, they duck and weave, unable to decide whether to stay together; not much happens, and, like Laura, you want things to move on. Yet Frears keeps jump-starting the action with fast cuts, flashbacks, and a jolting current of loud music. (The end credits, which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FIGHT CLUB *Four wildly divergent examples of Japan's B-movie weirdness arrive at the Screening Room this week, and they offer up unprecedented combinations of kung fu, Pop art, art rock, and feminism. Not to be missed is Yasuharu Hasebe's 1966 "Black Tight Killers," which features a cadre of girl assassins whose weaponry includes 45-r.p.m. records and wads of bubble gum.*

roll to a Stevie Wonder song, send you out on a high.) Why Frears made the film so dark and rain-drenched is something of a mystery; perhaps he was seeking a visual match for the glumness of perpetual adolescence. No love, the film ruefully suggests, will ever be as much fun as a good love song. Fortunately, Cusack and the rest of the cast—notably Jack Black, as a noxious compound of slob and snob—insist, like all good discophiles, on hearing both sides.—*A.L.* (4/3/00) (Cinema I, Criterion Center, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, and Village East Cinemas.)

JOE GOULD'S SECRET

The great Ian Holm, rampaging and melancholy, plays Joe Gould, the Greenwich Village bohemian, genius, drunkard, bum, and faker whom the reporter Joseph Mitchell immortalized in two pieces written for this magazine. As Gould, Holm darts around the Village streets and bars like a water bug, displaying the largest vocal and temperamental range of his career so far. As Mitchell, Stanley Tucci, who also directed, is a proper and gracious Southern gentleman both drawn to and exasperated by the wild Gould, who claims to have written an enormous underground history of New York City. Tucci re-creates an older, more generous New York, as mellow as amber, but the heart of the picture is Gould's mysterious hold on Mitchell. Tucci, taking off from a suggestion of Mitchell's, implies that Gould's entertaining shenanigans and spectacular, self-chosen failure may have caused Mitchell to despair of his own writing. In the end, the movie sentimentalizes a baffling, even sinister, ethos of silence. Adapted by Howard A. Rodman.—*David Denby* (4/10/00) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, and Village East Cinemas.)

KEEPING THE FAITH

In New York, two boyhood friends now in their thirties—a young, aggressively modernizing rabbi (Ben Stiller) and a quiet, traditional priest (Edward Norton)—fall in love with the woman (Jenna Elfman) they loved as a girl years before. The story of this romantic comedy, concocted by Norton and a college friend, Stuart Blumberg, may be movie-ish, even gimmicky, but scene by scene the film plays well, sometimes extremely well, with lots of goofy and charming detail. In particular, Jenna Elfman has a radiant glow. As a grownup, she's a tough corporate executive with an earnest and soulful side—Jean Arthur may have a successor after all. In his first directorial effort, Norton, an intense young actor, shows a flare for romantic longing and an appreciation of the landscapes and moods of Manhattan. Look for a good running joke about a trading-card series called "Heroes of the Torah"—Jews in dark hats and beards who have been placed on collectors' cards like ballplayers.—*D.D.* (4/24 & 5/1/00) (Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema 3rd Avenue, East 86th Street Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, and Village Theatre VII.)

MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

This audacious, sensual portrait of an alienated intellectual in Castro's Cuba, circa 1961, is one of the great movies of its era. The director, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, puts the audience in the head of a would-be writer (Sergio Corrieri, in a marvellous performance) who comes to understand just how conflicted he is about everything—class and sex included. There's a ruthless, universal brand of comedy in his more fatuous deeds and utterances: he views the Revolution as his personal revenge against the stupidity of the Cuban bourgeoisie. But the movie is also full of tough-minded mystery. The classic sequence of the writer taking a girl to the Hemingway Museum is rich with ironies about the interplay of art, celebrity, and social conscience. Released in 1968. In Spanish.—*M.S.* (BAM Rose Cinemas; May 12.)

MICHAEL JORDAN TO THE MAX

At the end of this forty-five-minute IMAX valentine, Michael Jordan declares: "There *will* be a player better than me," but he doesn't really believe it, and neither does the audience. After viewing highlight upon highlight, you become convinced that Jordan didn't so much play basketball as bend the game to his will. The film follows the championship march of the Bulls through the 1998 playoffs, interspersed with his Airness's basic biography: North Carolina, N.B.A. stardom, Nike marketing juggernaut, etc. It's a glossy portrait, without blemish or nuance. There's no mention of intra-team conflicts, or any kind of utterance other than the standard sports-cliché stoicism. What the film does do well is place you courtside and then blast out your eardrums—a dribbling basketball apparently produces a titanic thunder. Noise aside, the spectacle of a seven-story Jordan elevating, double-pumping, and then swishing his jump shot should certainly thrill his legion of fans.—*M.A.* (Lincoln Square.)

THE SORROW AND THE PITY

A magnificent documentary epic on the German Occupation of France. Directed by Marcel Ophuls, this study in the psychology of history makes us ask what we and our friends and families would actually have done if our country had been invaded, like France. It's both oral history and essay: people who lived through the German Occupation tell us what they did during that catastrophic period, and we see and hear evidence that corroborates or corrects or sometimes flatly contradicts them. What makes the film innovative is the immediate annotation of what has just been said. As the perspectives ramify, we begin to get a fuller sense of what it was like to participate in the moral dream of an occupied nation than we have ever had. Released in 1970.—*Pauline Kael* (Film Forum.)

U-571

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Chelsea Cinemas, Coronet Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Orpheum VII, Union Square, and Waverly 1 and 2.)

UP AT THE VILLA

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Angelika Film Center, First & 62nd Cinemas, and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE VIRGIN SUICIDES

Sofia Coppola's directorial début is a seventies period piece about five blond suicidal sisters (the Lisbons) and the young men who love them. It's hard to brighten suicide, and even harder to make it funny and mysterious at the same time, and this adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel veers awkwardly between comedy and fable. Coppola concentrates mostly on re-creating the mood of the book: the fantastic intensity of adolescence, when certain girls (and the desperate acts they inspire) can acquire the status of legend. We are told of the unravelling of the sisters from the boys' perspective (Giovanni Ribisi does the narration), but the film comes most alive when it goes inside the girls' hothouse environment: the handwritten notes, purple-inked doodles, and slumber-party décor are rendered perfectly. James Woods and Kathleen Turner turn in terrifyingly accurate performances as the overprotective Catholic parents of the Lisbon clan, but the overall atmosphere doesn't seem menacing enough: is being forced to burn your favorite "Kiss" album really reason to end it all?—*M.A.* (Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.)

ALSO PLAYING

THE BIG KAHUNA

Beekman, Lincoln Square, and Union Square.

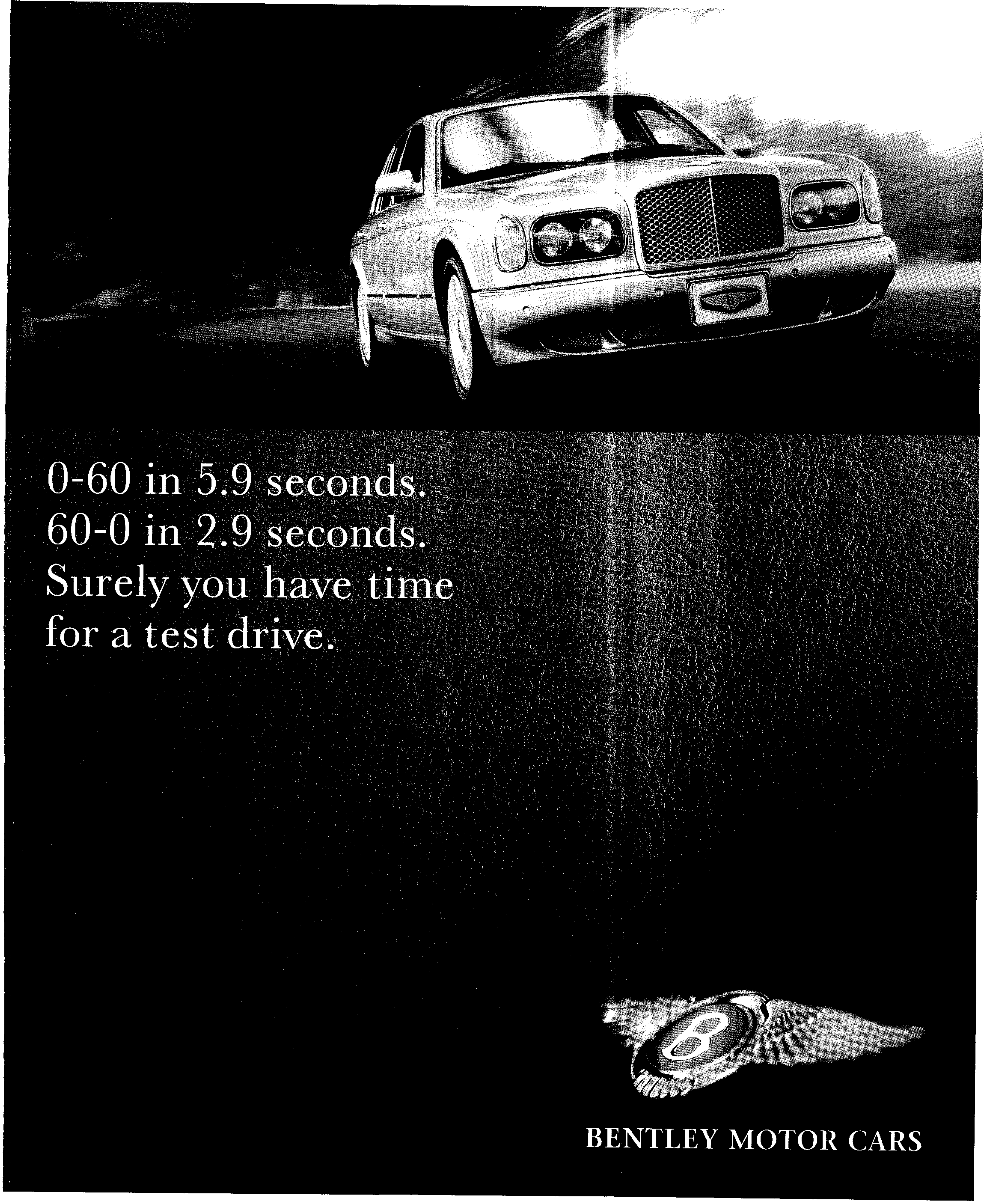
EAST-WEST

BAM Rose Cinemas and Paris.

ERIN BROCKOVICH

Coronet Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, and State.

MARINA SAGONA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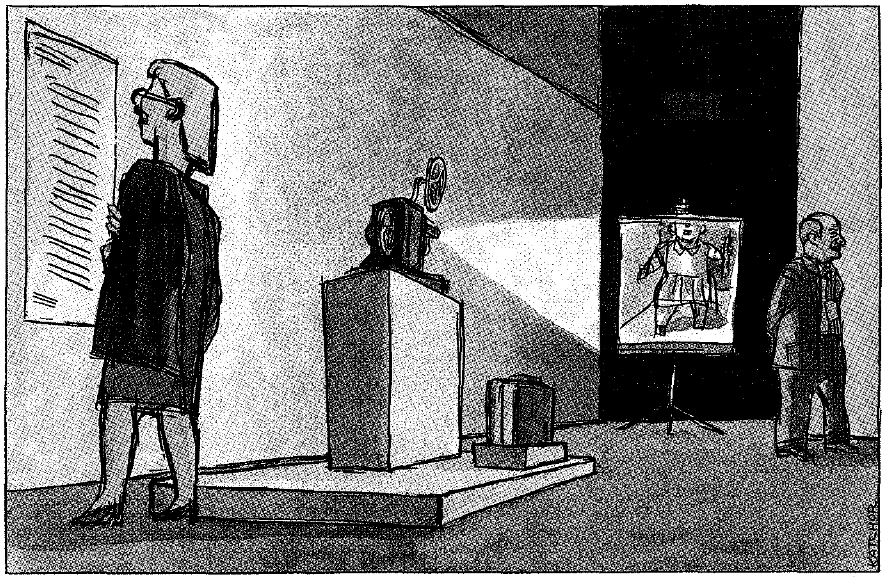
I DREAMED OF AFRICA
Chelsea West, 42nd Street E Walk, Murray Hill Cinemas, Orpheum VII, and Union Square.
THE LAST SEPTEMBER
Eastside Playhouse and Village East Cinemas.
TIME CODE
Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Square.
WHERE THE HEART IS
East 86th Street, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Murray Hill Cinemas, 62nd & Broadway, and Union Square.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

Unless noted, call 777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Art Greenwich Twin, Greenwich Ave. at 12th St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770).



ALL IN THE FAMILY *The home movie, a genre that includes that exquisite form of torture known as "your best friends' barbecue," sports an impressive pedigree. The first installment of MOMA's four-month-long exhibition, "Home Movies," ranges from Louis Lumière's 1895 "Repas de Bébé" to Ken Jacobs's 1999 film loop "Baby Advances." Future programs will show the elasticity of the form, with work by Andy Warhol, Charles and Ray Eames, Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman, and many amateurs.*

Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema I, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema II, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema 3rd Avenue, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3363).
Coronet Cinemas, Third Ave. at 59th St.
Criterion Center, Broadway at 44th St.
East 85th Street, First Ave. at 85th St.
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Eastside Playhouse, Third Ave. at 55th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (398-3939).
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Gotham Cinema, Third Ave. at 58th St.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Broadway at 99th St.
Murray Hill Cinemas, 160 E. 34th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 67th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
State, Broadway at 45th St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Waverly 1 and 2, Sixth Ave. at 3rd St.
Worldwide Cinemas, 50th St. between Eighth and Ninth Aves.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Women filmmakers and actresses from the silent-film era. May 13 at 2: "Back to God's Country" (1919, David Hartford). ♦ May 13 at 4: "Something New" (1920, Nell Shipman). ♦ May 14 at 2: "A Sister to Carmen" (1913, Charles L. Gaskill and Helen Gardner). ♦ May 14 at 4:30: "The Grub Stake" (1922, Shipman).
ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (505-5110)—May 10 at 8: "Rendezvous in Samarkand" (1999, Tim Bridwell). ♦ May 12 at 8: "Gemide (On Board)" (1998, Serdar Akar; in Turkish). ♦ May 13 at 7 and 9:30: "Short Attention Span Film Festival," a two-hour program of under-two-minute films. ♦ May 13-14 at 8: Short films by Joseph Cornell.
BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770)—All show times are at 4:30, 7, and 9:30 unless

BEN KATCHOR

otherwise noted. May 10 at 7:15 and 9:30: "Le Samouraï" (1967, Jean-Pierre Melville; in French). ♦ May 11: "Tension" (1949, John Berry). ♦ May 12: "Memories of Underdevelopment" (†). ♦ May 13: "Drowning by Numbers" (1988, Peter Greenaway). ♦ May 14 at 2, 3:30, 6:30, and 9:30: "Bonnie and Clyde" (1967, Arthur Penn). ♦ May 15: "Grüningers Fall" (1997, Richard Dindo). ♦ May 16: "Pursued" (1947, Raoul Walsh).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—A Stanley Kubrick retrospective. May 10 at 1:10, 4, 7:05, and 10: "The Killing" (1956). ♦ May 10 at 2:40, 5:40, and 8:40: "Killer's Kiss" (1955). ♦ May 11 at 3, 6, and 9: "Eyes Wide Shut" (1999). ♦ May 12-14 and May 16 at 1:20 and 7: "The Sorrow and the Pity" (†). ♦ The films of Clara Bow. May 15 at 1, 4, and 8: "The Plastic Age" (1925, Wesley Ruggles). ♦ May 15 at 2:30, 5:30, and 9:50: "Her Wedding Night" (1930, Frank Tuttle).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—A program of postwar Italian cinema. All films in Italian. May 11 at 6 and May 12 at 2:30: "Nothing Left to Do But Cry" (1984, Massimo Troisi). ♦ May 12 at 6: "I Giorni Contati" (1962, Elio Petri). ♦ May 12 at 8: "Pianese Nunzio" (1996, Antonio Capuano). ♦ A retrospective of home movies. May 12 at 7:30: "Family Scenes" (1932-42, unknown) and "Chapman Films" (1934-43, Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman). ♦ May 13 at 2: "Repas de Bébé" (1895, Louis Lumière), "Griffith Home Movies" (1936, Evelyn Baldwin Griffith), and "ItalianAmerican" (1974, Martin Scorsese).

MUSEUM OF TELEVISION AND RADIO
25 W. 52nd St. (621-6800)—Through May 21, a documentary-television festival. The filmmakers will be present at each screening. May 11 at 6: "American Hollow" (1999, Rory Kennedy). ♦ May 12 at 6: "Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided" (2000, David Grubin). ♦ May 16 at 6: "The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison" (1998, Liz Garbus and Jonathan Stack).

THE SCREENING ROOM
54 Varick St. (334-2100)—May 12-18: The premières of four Japanese B-movies. All films in Japanese. May 12-16 at 4 and 9:45: "Female Convict 'Scorpion'—Jailhouse 41" (1972, Shunya Ito). ♦ May 12-16 at 7:55: "Black Tight Killers" (1966, Yasuharu Hasebe). ♦ May 12, 14, and 16 at 6:05: "Ecstasy of Angels" (1970, Koji Wakamatsu). ♦ May 13 at 6:05: "Go, Go Second Time Virgin" (1969, Wakamatsu).

SYMPHONY SPACE
2537 Broadway (864-1414)—Films from Africa. May 16 at 7: "Mortu Nega (Whom Death Refused)" (1988, Flora Gomes; in Criolo). ♦ May 16 at 8:45: "Le Choix" (1987, Burkina Faso; in Mooré).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (875-5600)—A celebration of Burt Lancaster. May 10 at 1 and 6:15: "From Here to Eternity" (1953, Fred Zinnemann). ♦ May 10 at 8:40 and May 14 at 6:20: "Go Tell the Spartans" (†). ♦ May 12 at 5 and 9:10: "Apache" (1954, Robert Aldrich). ♦ May 12 at 2:50 and 7: "Ulzana's Raid" (1972, Aldrich). ♦ May 13 at 4 and 9: "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957, Alexander MacKendrick). ♦ May 13 at 6: "Elmer Gantry" (1960, Richard Brooks). ♦ May 14 at 4 and 8:40: "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral" (1957, John Sturges). ♦ May 16 at 1 and 6: "The Swimmer" (1968, Frank Perry).

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—Film and video selections from the 2000 Whitney Biennial. Highlights listed here. Tuesdays at noon: "Driver 23" (1998, Rolf Belgum). ♦ Wednesdays at 3: "Okay Bye-Bye" (1998, Rebecca Baron). ♦ Thursdays at 6:10: "Gummo" (1998, Harmony Korine). ♦ Fridays at noon: "Alma" (1998, Ruth Leitman). ♦ Saturdays at noon: "Spectres of the Spectrum" (1999, Craig Baldwin). ♦ Saturdays at 3: "Instrument" (1999, Jem Cohen with Fugazi). ♦ Sundays at 3: "Fast, Cheap, & Out of Control" (1997, Errol Morris).

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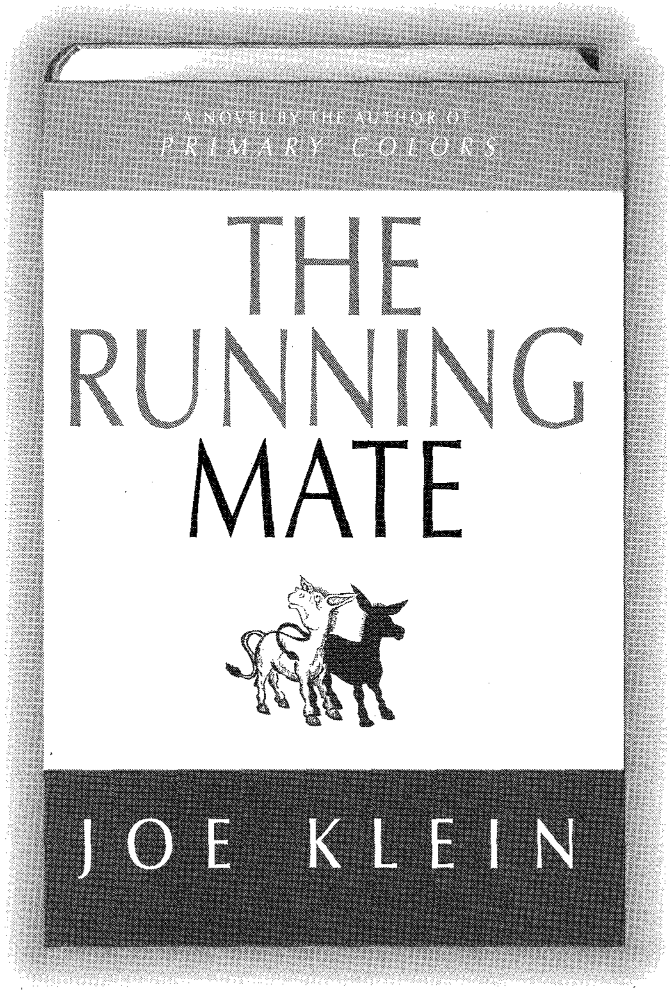

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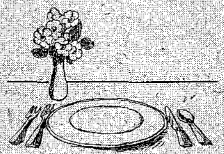

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THE
NEW YORKER

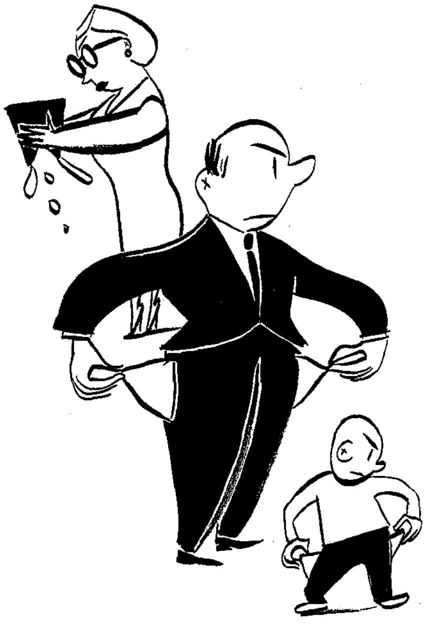
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THAT'S THE WAY THE MONEY GOES

During the current economic expansion, the longest on record, it has become fashionable among economists to suggest that recessions—or, at least, deep recessions—are historical artifacts, like typewriters and telex machines, which may still pop up in less developed countries but not in our shiny New Economy. That optimism is about to be tested. By this time next year, we could well find ourselves in the sort of old-fashioned slump that would make the current optimism seem silly, at best. Nothing is certain—a prophecy of doom is just another questionable economic forecast—but three dire scenarios are discernible.

Scenario One: The stock market collapses. Stock prices have fallen only to the levels of last summer; in a real panic, they would probably fall far enough to bring them into line with their historic values. It's true that stocks can be valued in many ways, but most of the time-honored methods—the price-earnings ratio, the dividend yield, the price-to-book-value ratio, Tobin's "q" ratio—suggest that the market is still overvalued by at least a quarter and maybe by as much as a half. Another four-thousand-point drop in the Dow, or a further two-thousand-point shakeout in the Nasdaq, may seem unthinkable to many CNBC viewers, but, from a long-term perspective, it would merely represent what statisticians call a "reversion to the mean."

The trickier question is whether a stock-market collapse would lead to a recession in the economy at large. Many economists, including Alan Greenspan, are confident that it wouldn't. Were the Dow to tumble, they argue, the Federal Reserve could cut interest rates in order to keep businesses and consumers spending, just as it did in the aftermath of the 1987 crash. But this isn't 1987. Investing in stocks is far more popular now. More than half of American households have money in the market, and many of them have borrowed on the backs of their stock portfolios. If the market were to fall by thirty or forty per cent, the American public would be about five trillion dollars poorer, and it would, surely, curtail its spending. Assuming that consumers spend five cents less for every dollar they lose in wealth (which is what economic research indicates), the economy would be facing a negative-spending shock of about two hundred and fifty billion dollars. This factor alone might not send a nine-trillion-dollar economy into recession, but a stock-market collapse would also torpedo corporate investment, the real-estate market, and, possibly, parts of the banking system. In this case, Greenspan could find himself powerless to prevent a slump.



Scenario Two: The dollar collapses. Every month, Americans spend nearly thirty billion dollars more on foreign imports, like Japanese televisions and German cars, than foreigners spend on American exports, like Hollywood movies. In order to pay for all these imports, we encourage foreigners to accumulate American assets: bank C.D.s, stocks, Treasury bonds, and even companies. From an economic perspective, the trade deficit, which is running at record levels, represents borrowing. Americans are spending more than they produce and counting on money from abroad to make up the difference. Like all debt schemes, this one has to have willing lenders if it is to continue.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

"We're pretty sure it's the West Nile virus."

• •

When North America was the only thriving part of the world, as it was for much of the nineties, the global appetite for dollar-denominated assets appeared insatiable. But other regions, such as Europe and Asia, are now recovering rapidly and competing for investors' money. If foreigners decide, for whatever reason, that they already have enough American investments, or, God forbid, that they want to sell them en masse, the value of the dollar would plummet. The Fed would then be forced to raise interest rates sharply to protect the currency, and the economy would suffer badly. This chain of events may sound unlikely, but it happened in Southeast Asia just a couple of years ago. The recession that followed was the deepest in the region since the thirties.

Scenario Three: Greenspan gets tough. Since last summer, the Fed chairman and his colleagues have raised interest rates five times—each time by a quarter point—to reduce the rate of economic growth and head off inflation. This gradualist policy has failed. In the first three months of this year, personal spending increased at the fastest clip in seventeen years, and in March inflation picked up to an annual rate of 3.7 per cent. Even New Economy optimists are now having second thoughts. Robert McTeer, the president and C.E.O. of the Dallas Federal Reserve Bank, and a true believer, recently suggested that the idea that technology had killed off inflation was now outdated.

Many observers expect a half-point interest-rate hike when the Fed's policymakers meet on May 16th, but even that won't be enough to restrain American consumers. Between March of 1988 and June of 1989, the Fed raised interest rates by about three percentage points to slow the economy; it raised them by three points again between February of 1994 and February of 1995. Since last summer, interest rates have gone up by just one and a quarter percentage points. Using this admittedly rough indicator, borrowing costs of seven and a half or eight per cent are likely. And, since the economy is growing more vigorously now than it was in either of the earlier periods, interest rates might have to go even higher.

The 1994-95 period was a textbook example of the Fed heading off inflation without sinking the economy, but that success is unlikely to be repeated. Symptoms of economic overheating were a lot less visible then, and the Dow was under 5,000. Today, the situation is similar to the one that Japan, the United Kingdom, Finland, and Sweden faced in the late nineteen-eighties. In all four countries, there was a startling run-up in asset prices, which left people feeling much wealthier, and this, in turn, led to spending booms, plunging savings rates, and trade deficits. In all four countries, the central bank eventually raised interest rates in order to cool off the economy. And in all four countries boom was followed by deep recession, as asset prices tumbled and consumers cut back their spending in an attempt to rebuild their savings. As we all know, America is an exceptional country, and things may turn out differently here. But Al Gore and George W. Bush, not to mention the rest of us, wouldn't be wise to bet on it.

—*John Cassidy*

INK
WILL THE REAL UNCLE DUKE PLEASE STAND UP?

Hunter S. Thompson says that he wants nothing to do with this year's Presidential race, but the campaign appears to be pursuing him. One day in March, he was perplexed when friends began calling his house, near Aspen, to say they'd heard he was going to be on "Larry King Live." Advertisements for the show were saying that the real Duke from "Doonesbury" was going to be that night's guest. When Thompson tuned in, he was dumbfounded to see a computer-animated version of Uncle Duke, the longtime "Doonesbury" character who is modelled on him (cigarette holder, bald head, manic gleam), promoting his candidacy for President. ("It was the stupidest thing I've ever seen," Thompson growled.) On top of that, ever since the end of March, when a story in the New York *Observer* mentioned that George W. Bush had attended a party Thompson threw during the 1974 Super Bowl, in Houston, he has been besieged with questions about Bush's behavior.

Uncle Duke has dogged Thompson for more than twenty-five years. Thompson created Raoul Duke in 1968 as a literary alter ego, and when he made him

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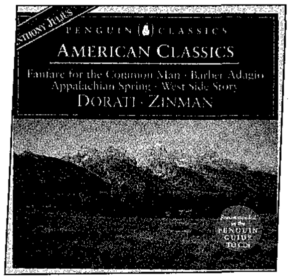
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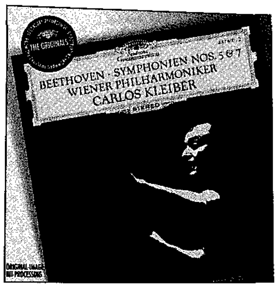
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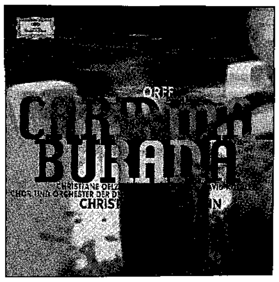
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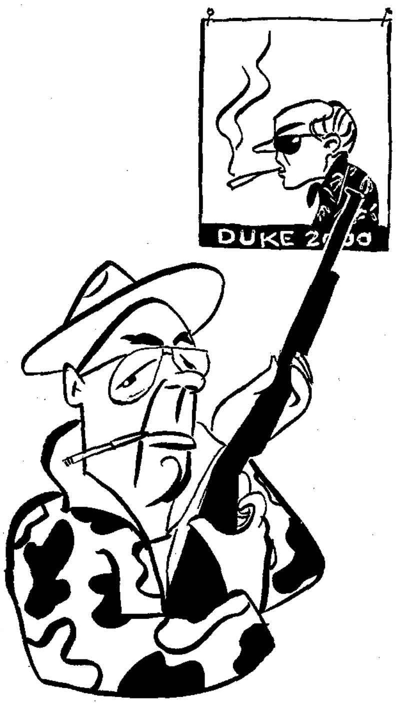
the protagonist of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," Duke became one of the most famous antiheroes in American letters. Then, in 1974, Garry Trudeau's comic-strip version of Duke appeared. "I was seriously mortified to see myself," Thompson said the other day. "It was like being picked up by an alien spaceship and taken inside and having a biopsy or two drilled out of you, and then being set loose again in the world. You can't expect others to understand how horrible it was. How would you like to be mocked in Li'l Abner or Dick Tracy every day?"

To this day, Thompson and Trudeau have never met. Trudeau's stock reply regarding the inspiration for Duke has been "I'd rather not talk about this, either on or off the record." But Thompson's frustration comes through in some correspondence he had in 1975 with his friend Sandy Berger, who was then a partner in the law firm Hogan & Hartson and is now President Clinton's national-security adviser. On September 10, 1975, Thompson wrote to Berger, "With the legal definition of a public figure a bit hazy now, this comix assault strikes me as playing with fire . . . or maybe I'm totally wrong. . . . And if that's the case I sure as hell don't want to get tied up in a money-ulcer lawsuit that'll drive me mad."

Although Thompson considered filing a libel suit, with Berger as his lawyer, he decided against it. "I didn't want to grapple in the gutter with Trudeau," Thompson says. But this latest turn of events—Duke's Presidential campaign being launched from Aspen, the character's appearance on CNN, products bearing his image being marketed—has provoked Thompson again. "You'd think a nice boy whose parents suffered and saved to send him to Yale would learn something more up there than how to steal other people's work," Thompson says, adding, "If the bastard would put a wig on Duke or had him in dreadlocks, it would help a lot."

He is no more sanguine about this year's real Presidential candidates. Recently, he turned down an offer from *Time* to write "Fear and Loathing on the Straight Talk Express." Thompson is busy with several projects: compiling a second volume of his letters; helping with a special issue of *The Paris Review* to be devoted largely to his career; and writing a screenplay for a film version of his novel "The Rum Diary." Besides, he says, "the leading candidates—Gore and Bush—are basically the same, compared to, say, Nixon versus McGovern in '72. It would be like covering a fixed football game or prizefight."

Until now, Thompson has not said anything about the Super Bowl bash that the then twenty-eight-year-old George W. attended. In the March *Observer* piece, Ron Rosenbaum, one of Bush's classmates at Yale, wrote, "I sensed what W. liked about Hunter Thompson was that Hunter too was another button-down good old frat boy (once) who went weird but in a good-old-boy way." When Thompson was asked the other day about Bush's behavior that long-ago evening, he said, "I can't be expected to remember what every drug-addled yuppie hanger-oner who wanted to get close to me during a football game twenty-five years ago digested. There were so many dope fiends milling about, I don't remember what some Yalie named Bush, whose father was a factotum in the Nixon Administration, was doing. But he strikes me as the sort of person I would have thrown out of the room. A rich, beer-drunk yahoo with a big allowance who passes out in your bathtub." O.K., but what actually happened that night in Houston? "I don't want to become the Deep Drug Throat," Thompson insisted. "I won't do it."

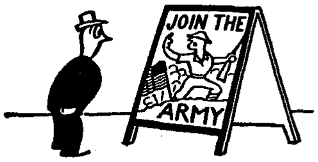


Hunter S. Thompson

—*Douglas Brinkley*

MOSCOW POSTCARD

BILLBOARD POLITICS



The old Soviet Union was a vast mysterium, an empire with a private language that defied an outsider's comprehension but was well understood by its subjects. The state communicated with the people in many forms. Billboards, like everything else, were state property, and their content was controlled by the Communist Party. "The People and the Party are one!" That was clear. So were the folksier admonitions: "Bus driver is an interesting profession!" And "Love books, a source of knowledge!" And "If you want to know what is going on in the world, keep a newspaper in your apartment." These messages meant, respectively, "Work," "Get an education," and "Read *Pravda*."

Nowadays, billboards are privately owned, but the messages are more confounding. Often, they are purely commercial. Along Leningradsky Prospekt, in Moscow, there are ads for Ford and a Panasonic video camera; two cats lure you to an all-night food store; women pose languorously in designer underwear. Then a new sign catches the eye: big black letters on a yellow background reading, "Gentlemen from the Bank of New York! We warn you that in Russia fraud involving securities will not be tolerated." The subject is clear—the recent allegations of money laundering—but the mystery remains: Who paid for the message? Who is meant to be intimidated?

Billboard intrigue—the politics of billboards—has become commonplace in Moscow. Early on, we saw the face of a beautiful woman with the message "I love you." The rumor was that a wealthy man was simply celebrating his girlfriend. About a year ago, on the road leading to the most prestigious Moscow suburb, a billboard appeared showing the

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smiling face of the oil tycoon Roman Abramovich, who is rumored to be close to "the Family," the tight circle around former President Boris Yeltsin. The billboard read, "Roma"—the diminutive for Roman—"takes care of the Family, the Family takes care of Roma. Congratulations! Roma found a classy place for himself." Again, was this a threat, sarcasm, or (least likely) a congratulatory note? The billboard disappeared after a few days.

Lately, there have been warring billboards about a dispute over how best to run the vast Russian aluminum industry: with or without a complicated practice called "tolling." But then another billboard campaign came along that mocked the language of the aluminum war, using sexual rather than commercial catchwords. "Ban petting! Stop debauching Russia!" one read. "Permit petting! Stop restraining Russia!" was another. When political opponents of the former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov wanted to make sure that he would not be elected President, they put up a billboard showing a picture of a wheelchair and "congratulating" him on his seventieth birthday. "All best wishes!"

Sometimes the billboards reflect both futile ambition and ironic etiquette, which are particularly Russian traits. During the Presidential race, one long-shot contender, Umar Dzhabrailov, the co-owner of one of the capital's most expensive hotels, plastered his face all over town; the billboards looked more like ads for Armani or Zegna than like campaign posters. When Dzhabrailov got .08 per cent of the vote, he decorated Moscow yet again, this time with billboards showing his face, the number "0.08," and the simple message "Thank you. With love, Umar."

—*Masha Lipman*

THE SMALL SCREEN
MAKING "THE CORNER" REAL

A skinny young woman—Fran Boyd's her name—walks down a ruined street in West Baltimore. Time: midday. She's witty and colored and tough, even with her heroin jones on. She uses all her charm to get a cigarette off a neighbor before sitting down on her stoop, where she's set to mind her own business and everyone else's, when a guy with a video camera approaches her stealthily, like a bug with a giant eye. He's bugging her; Fran doesn't want to talk about her family, her dead sister, or whether her heavy habit sets a bad example for her sons, especially her oldest child. This son is a teen-ager who sells coke on the corner where Fran cops, and where her ex-husband and her sister and brother cop—a busy intersection where depressed and poor and self-destructive black life meets death. "Why don't you move your ass out of here," Fran says. There's acid in her voice; it could dissolve anybody's good intentions. And, as the camera creeps away, Fran slaps on her sunglasses, more determined than ever, it seems, to "try and make a dollar out of fifteen cents," as the old street rhyme goes.

The actress Khandi Alexander, who portrays Fran Boyd in the six-part HBO production "The Corner," expresses all those emotions and turns of thought with subtlety and brilliance. In the series, which is based on the nonfiction book "The Corner," by David Simon and Edward Burns, Alexander does something that is rarely seen in black actors working in film or television: she plays her character less in response to what her race is supposed to represent than as a complex human being whose race is a factor. In this regard, Alexander brings to mind the late black actress Diana Sands, who moved and unnerved audiences with her performances in "A Raisin in the Sun" and "The Landlord." It's a comparison that brings out Alexander's modesty. "Oh, Lord, no," she said from her home in Los Angeles, her cigarette-husky voice erupting in a fusillade of giggles. "I mean, Diana Sands! Wasn't she amazing? It was her, and Pearl Bailey, who made me want to perform. Ever since I was growing up in Queens, a hundred years ago." Alexander's mentors notwithstanding, her work and her style are completely her own, whether in lowdown comedy (the Chris Rock vehicle "CB4") or in generic upscale televison ("ER," "Newsradio"). Trained as a dancer, she also performed in Michael Bennett's "Dreamgirls" and in the Los Angeles production of Bob Fosse's "Dancin'." A dancing turn on the American Music Awards led to her meeting Whitney Houston, who asked her to choreograph her world tour. "Between Michael and Whitney, I was waking up in hair weaves," she says, with a laugh. "I mean, I was fabulous! Dressed. Diva'ed and not knowing shit. I was taking acting classes in between tour dates, but I wasn't doing it, you know." She went on, "And I loved those TV shows, too. I loved the money. But I had to leave them in order to learn how to act. Not until I left those shows, and started studying with Arthur Mendoza, at the Stella Adler Conservatory, did I start doing it. He made me stop dancing, to get rid of that dancer's walk, and he made me work in a grocery store, to get real. He made me take the subway. In Los Angeles! Isn't that deep?"

The director of "The Corner," Charles S. Dutton, encouraged each of his actors to achieve what Alexander calls "the realness factor." Referring to Dutton, she said, "He grew up in the shit. He knew what was in Baltimore. I remember that when my agent told me there was this show about crackheads, at first I was, like, 'You're fired! You are so totally fired!' 'Cause that's what they offer us, you know? But when I read the script, and read about Fran sitting on her stoop, smoking a Newport, I knew her. On the day of the audition, I got up, in my mismatched pajamas, rag on my head, and I was going to take a shower, and I looked in the mirror and I was, like, 'Why are you taking a shower? Go to the audition. Now. Dressed like that. You're an addict! Don't put on that makeup.' So I didn't.

"On the first day of rehearsal, Dutton gave me the best note a director has ever given me," Alexander recalled. "He said, 'Don't play the drug, the *Oh, feel sorry for me* addict. Play the woman. Play her as the animal she is—vicious, single-minded, self-serving.' So I just played Fran, who works as a drug counsellor in Baltimore now. She's been sober four years. She pursued her sobriety with the same ferocity with which she pursued her addiction."

—*Hilton Als*

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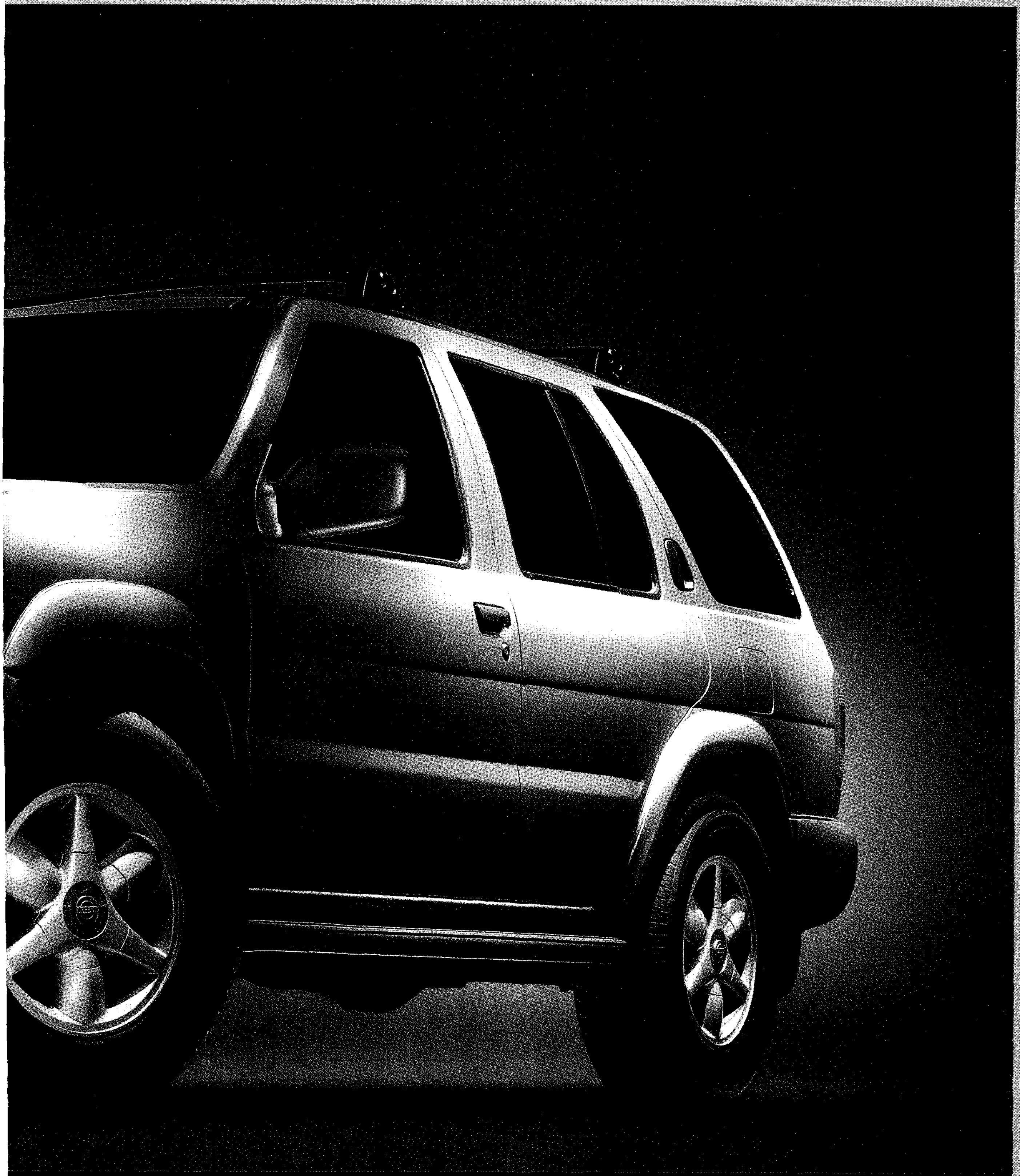

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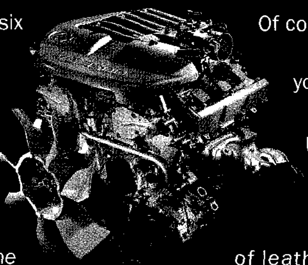

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THE FINANCIAL PAGE
HOW TO BUST THE BASEBALL TRUST

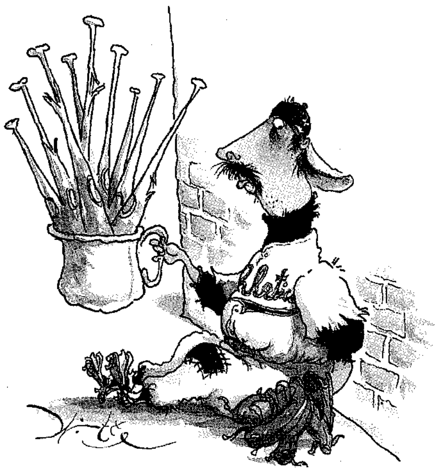
When was the Golden Age of baseball? It's a phrase that conjures sepia-toned photos and heavy flannel uniforms, not polyester-clad players skidding their way across AstroTurf. But when music and fashion were at their worst, baseball was at its best. The fifteen years after free agency was introduced, in 1976, were the most competitive in the game's history: between 1978 and 1987, ten different teams won the World Series. In the second half of the eighties, the game's revenues nearly doubled, and even small-market teams were successful on the field and at the box office.

And today? Baseball has become a sport in which how much money a team takes in largely determines its success or failure on the field. Yes, yes, people have been prophesying doom for years, but now it's time to listen. The haves get taxpayer-funded high-end stadiums like Camden Yards, in Baltimore, and Jacobs Field, in Cleveland, and especially lucrative local-TV contracts; the have-nots can barely pay for the hot dogs. Baseball is the Brazil of sports, a land of paupers and plutocrats. This year, the Yankees will make an estimated $200 million. The Minnesota Twins will make $40 million. Not coincidentally, the last time the Twins won anything was 1991. The Yankees, of course, have won three of the last four World Series, and nobody will be surprised if they take home the title this year.

The Yankees have more than money on their side: Brian Cashman, their aptly named general manager, has a real gift for assessing talent. But so does Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland A's, who last year shaped a collection of minor-league veterans, major-league castoffs, and young players into a club that almost won a division title (albeit in a sub-par division). "We have to get the best player we can for the smallest amount of money," Beane says. "If you think of a player's career as a bell curve, we get them on the way up or on the way down. But players in their prime are just going to be too expensive for us."

Beane's success is an anomaly. "In the last four years, if you're not one of the top twelve teams in terms of payroll, you don't make the playoffs," Andrew Zimbalist, a sports economist at Smith, says, "And if you're in the bottom half in terms of payroll you almost never get over a .500 winning percentage." Zimbalist has shown that until 1994 there was no connection between a team's payroll and its winning percentage, whereas in the past two years the two have become strongly correlated. In baseball these days, the richer you are, the richer you get, and the richer you get, the more you win. It's all too much like real life.

This sort of inequality doesn't hurt just poor teams, whose fans become disheartened by the seeming inevitability of defeat and so are less likely to come to games; it's bad for the richer teams, too. In the long run, the Yankees are going to be only as healthy as the game is.



There are a couple of ways to level the AstroTurf. One solution is socialism: a serious revenue-sharing program, like the N.F.L.'s. Naturally, owners of the rich teams say that revenue-sharing penalizes success, which would be more persuasive if their success didn't have so much to do with their deep pockets. If you don't like socialism, there's another solution: the free market. For a market to work, capital has to be able to flow to its most productive use, so that supply can rise to meet demand. That can't happen in baseball, because teams have exclusive territorial rights. Get rid of those strictures, and you wouldn't have two teams for twenty million people in the New York area; you'd have maybe five or six, either through expanding the current number or by allowing teams to relocate from other cities. Fifty years ago, after all, there were three New York teams, in a much smaller market. More competition would reduce the "monopoly rents" (in the economists' argot) that the Yankees can now exact, driving down the amount they could spend on their payroll and making it easier for smaller teams to compete.

So the choice is really between the two main ways our society allocates resources: markets and hierarchies. We use markets to organize most of our economy because, like Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, we believe that individual self-seeking can produce collective good, as long as there's a free market in capital and labor. But we also recognize the virtues of hierarchies, since corporations, however decentralized, are essentially hierarchical. (What's good for General Electric as a whole trumps what might be good for any one of its divisions, and the C.E.O. decides what's good for General Electric.) Baseball, though, is neither truly hierarchical—big-market teams put their own interests ahead of the interests of the game as a whole—nor truly market-driven, since owners are essentially feudal lords of their own walled-off fiefdoms. And the costs are borne by consumers. Tickets and concessions cost more than they would otherwise. Games that were once on broadcast TV are migrating toward premium cable. And taxpayers are being asked to fund the kind of fancy stadiums that now seem to be the only hope of financial salvation for many teams.

Across the business world, this misbegotten mixture of command-economy monopoly and free-market pricing has led to disastrous results. Just look at the American auto industry before the advent of Japanese and German competition, or at the recent performance of local telephone and cable companies: it's the same picture of high prices, low innovation, and a disregard for customers. Time Warner, for instance, wouldn't have tried to boot ABC off its cable systems if consumers could have easily switched to another cable provider. Let the major leagues take note. The free market can save baseball, by letting more teams compete in the big markets. Socialism can save baseball, by redistributing revenue. But don't mess with Mister In Between.

—*James Surowiecki*

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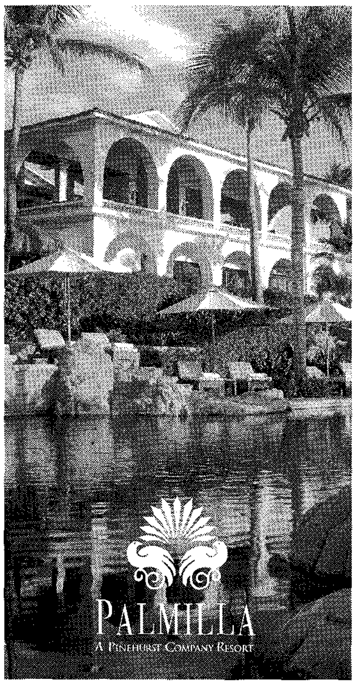

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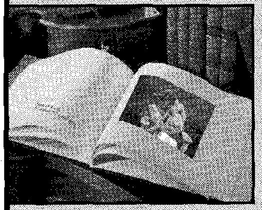

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REPUTATIONS

THE SPY WHO FAILED

Did the great anti-Fascist novelist Ignazio Silone betray his cause?

BY ALEXANDER STILLE

During the summer of 1930, a sick, penniless Italian exile living in Switzerland began writing a novel about peasant life under Fascism in his native region of the Abruzzi. "Since, in the doctors' view, I had only a short time to live, I wrote hurriedly . . . to construct to the best of my ability that village in which I put the quintessence of myself and the district in which I was born, so that at least I might die among my own people," the author, who had adopted the pseudonym Ignazio Silone, later wrote. It took Silone two years to find a publisher: a small Swiss firm, which published the novel, entitled "Fontamara," in 1933, in German translation. It was an immediate sensation, selling more than a million and a half copies, in twenty-seven languages. The novel was published on the eve of the Spanish Civil War, which forced the world to take sides on the Franco regime; it galvanized public opinion against Fascism and influenced an entire generation of American intellectuals, including Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Irving Howe, and Alfred Kazin. "In the light of 'Fontamara,' oppression, misery and injustice took on a luminous quality," Kazin wrote in his memoir "Growing Up in the Thirties." Silone's second novel, "Bread and Wine," which is also about the Abruzzi and came out three years after "Fontamara," met with even greater success. When the Allies invaded Italy, in 1943, to push back the Axis forces, they distributed unauthorized editions of both books to the Italians along the front.

In recent years, however, researchers have begun to turn up documents in police archives which strongly suggest that Silone, in the decade before he became a writer, acted as an informant for the Fascist police. To grasp how disturbing and unlikely a development this is, one has to appreciate the fact that Silone, who died in 1978, has long been regarded not only as an important novelist but also—like Orwell, Camus, and Malraux—as something of a secular saint, a man of rare intellectual and moral courage, who had opposed Fascism from the start and endured years of exile and persecution for his beliefs. He helped create the Italian Communist Party, then defied Stalin in the halls of the Kremlin, and finally, well before the big Moscow show trials, broke with Communism. After the war, Silone won a new set of readers, with a memoir describing his romance and disillusionment with Communism; it appeared in an anthology entitled "The God That Failed," along with essays by Arthur Koestler, André Gide, and Richard Wright, among others. Personal integrity was the central feature of his work. In "Bread and Wine" he wrote, "No word and no gesture can be more persuasive than the life and, if necessary, the death of a man who strives to be free, loyal, just, sincere, disinterested. A man who shows what a man can be."

Many of Silone's friends and supporters have refused even to read the incriminating documents, which were recently published in the book "L'Informatore" ("The Informant"), written by two Italian history professors, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali. "I wouldn't believe in the truth of these documents even if Silone rose from the tomb and confirmed them," Indro Montanelli, the highly respected editorialist for the Milan newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, has written. Others have accused Biocca and Canali of being publicity-hungry and of rushing their book into print before the material had been thoroughly evaluated.

But the documents—letters and reports—cannot be easily dismissed. Most Silone scholars now acknowledge their authenticity, even as they continue to dispute their meaning. These documents add a new dimension to Silone's already dramatic story, and, far from negating his work, they help to explain why, in the summer of 1930, he abandoned politics and became a novelist.

Like Orwell, Camus, and Malraux, Silone was regarded as a secular saint. Evidence now suggests that he was an informant.

JOHN PHILLIPS/TIME, INC.

Silone once remarked that he would willingly spend his life "writing and rewriting the same book, the single book that every writer has within that is the image of his soul." In Silone's case, this book was about his childhood, in the southern Italian region of the Abruzzi, and about the political odyssey that led him into and out of Communism. He was born in 1900 with the name Secondo Tranquilli, in an area of vast feudal estates where peasants eked out a subsistence living. The town described in "Fontamara" is "about a hundred shapeless one-story houses, battered by the wind and rain," along a "steep street that passes through the whole village." Most of the houses consisted of a single room, where the peasants lived with their chickens, pigs, and donkeys.

Although Silone was the son of a small landowner, he identified from a young age with the peasants, or *cafoni*. As a boy, he saw a local nobleman set his dog on a peasant woman, who was knocked to the ground and battered. The woman took the nobleman to court, where various paid witnesses testified that she had provoked the attack and no one would speak up on her behalf. She lost the suit and was stuck with the legal costs. The judge, a family friend of the Tranquillis, explained that, while he regretted the injustice, he was required to follow the facts presented at the trial. This, for Silone, exposed the hollow promise of law and democracy in "liberal" pre-Fascist Italy.

Silone's father died when the boy was eleven, and his mother was killed in an earthquake that levelled the area in 1915. Afterward, Silone was horrified to see a relative stealing from a victim buried in the rubble. In "Bread and Wine," the protagonist describes a similar scene and observes, "To grow up requires a whole life, but to become old one night like that is enough."

In his memoir, entitled "Uscita di Sicurezza" ("Emergency Exit"), Silone quoted a doctor from his village who used to say, "People who are born in this district are really out of luck. There's no halfway house; you've got to either be a rebel or become an accomplice." By the age of sixteen, Silone was already a rebel. Along with two other boys, he led a group of peasants as they stormed the local police barracks to protest the arrest of three residents. For twenty-four hours, before authorities arrived to restore order, this group ruled the town. "Couldn't we take advantage of the fact that the whole village is asleep to make Socialism?" one of the boys suggested.

Not long afterward, Silone moved to Rome and became a full-time activist in the Socialist youth movement. He was part of the radical wing of the Socialist Party, which split from the more cautious, reformist majority in 1921 and formed the Italian Communist Party, hoping to create a revolution in Italy. But in 1922 Mussolini and the

Fascists seized power, and, in the political crackdown that followed, the Communists were forced underground. Many of the Party leaders were imprisoned, and the young Silone took on more and more responsibility. He gained a seat on the central committee and was chosen to accompany the head of the Party, Palmiro Togliatti, to meetings at the Kremlin in 1927, at the height of the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky.

In his memoir, Silone describes how he and Togliatti refused to condemn Trotsky on the basis of evidence that they were not allowed to examine. He was later shocked to read that the Executive of the Communist International had unanimously passed a resolution against Trotsky. "Don't they realize that when they open the archives all their lies will eventually come out?" he asked Togliatti, and the Party leader replied, "If that's what you're worried about, relax: no important decision in the Soviet Union is written down."

Silone should perhaps have worried more about the archives of Mussolini's police. In the last three years, Canali and Biocca have unearthed what appears to be a correspondence between Silone and Guido Bellone, a police official in Rome who was in charge of investigating subversive groups in Italy. The letters are clearly those of an informant to his police handler, and are signed with the code name Silvestri. But the informant's true identity can be deduced from a number of details in the letters that closely correspond to the events of Silone's life in the late nineteen-twenties: his depression, his taking refuge in a clinic in Switzerland, his disillusionment with Communism, and the gradual return of his religious faith.

Moreover, there are government documents that explicitly link Silone to Bellone. A 1928 letter from the chief of the secret police to Mussolini states, "The Inspector General of Public Security Commissioner Guido Bellone has received a telegram from Basle from Tranquilli Secondino—one of the Communist leaders—giving notice of his arrival in Italy. The conversation with him could be interesting."

Silone's defenders have been forced to admit that these documents are genuine. "No one denies that Silone had some disconcerting contacts with the Fascist security apparatus," the historian Alexander De Grand writes in the current issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*. Some have tried to argue that Silone must have begun to collaborate with Bellone after his brother, Romolo Tranquilli, was arrested, in 1928, on suspicion of taking part in a terrorist bombing. His motive, according to this theory, was to win Romolo's release.

However, the documents published by Biocca and Canali show that Bellone and Silvestri were in touch in 1924, long before the arrest of Romolo. One police report, dated October 7, 1924, states, "Silvestri has been named the head of the Italian Communist movement for France, Belgium and Luxembourg, and therefore will be moving to Paris at the beginning of October." This precisely describes Silone's circumstances at the time.

Luce d'Eramo, a friend of Silone's who published a critical study of his work in 1971, offers another theory—that Silone was a double agent. "The documents may be authentic," she said, when I telephoned her at her home in Rome, "but Biocca and Canali leave out the most important thing: Silone was acting as an informant with the knowledge and consent of the Italian Communist Party. He was sending the Fascists generic and harmless reports in order to get information from them." D'Eramo claims that a Party official told her this in 1979, after Silone's death. Unfortunately, no evidence to

EVE

I like that room,
the warm one with machines
where the woman folds her shed skins.

I hang in the broken ceiling, watching her,
barely distinguishable
from the cold-water pipe
and the coiled power cable.

I watch her all winter:
her long-legged hands,
the glinting needles of fur at her nape,
her red warmness
drifting in mammaly billows.

And now I show myself,
pour my flickering head
into her sac of air,
and slowly, willed against her own will,
her face rises like a rising moon,
opening palely to mine,

and in the wide O's of her eyes
I see myself: my head like a big cut topaz,
the little watch-jewels of my eyes, yes,
my tongue the alive nerve of a rock,
and I feel her want,
a yearning almost,
as though for something already about to be lost.

And I offer myself.

—*James Lasdun*

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support this theory has been found in the archives of the Italian Communist Party, and d'Eramo's source is now dead. And if there was nothing improper about his relationship with the Fascist police why did Silone never mention it during his lifetime?

Furthermore, if one reads the full range of documents that have now been published, it is difficult to see them as "generic and harmless." In one, for example, the informant told the police about a network of Communist railway workers who helped smuggle Party propaganda into Italy; the network was promptly dismantled. From Berlin, he provided information about go-betweens who brought the Communists donations from abroad, giving names, descriptions, and bank information. But the most chilling evidence comes from the period after Silone was made head of the Party's clandestine organization in Italy, in 1927. Bellone's informant, identified here as "T," provided a detailed breakdown of the underground organizations in Italy's main cities, and these groups were systematically rounded up by the police. The only cell that was not raided was Silone's, in Rome. (Silone's supporters dispute the attribution of these letters, while Biocca and Canali insist that "T" stands for "Tranquilli.")

On the other hand, Silone's position in the Party gave him access to far more information than he passed on to Bellone, which suggests that he was a reluctant informant. And Silvestri's growing sense of guilt is evident in a letter he sent to Bellone in July of 1929:

> You understandably complain about the infrequency of my letters: our relations can become more regular and frequent only if they change in nature and character. At the point I have reached in my moral and intellectual formation, it is *physically* impossible for me to maintain the same relations with you as ten years ago. . . . The first thing to eliminate, because it leaves me either indifferent or humiliated, is money. But we can speak about this in person with greater ease.

The arrest of his brother (who later died in prison) would have made Silone's position unbearable. Romolo Tranquilli, emulating his older brother, was sacrificing himself for a cause that Silone had lost faith in and appears to have been actively betraying. At the same time, Silone must have worried that if he tried to sever his ties to the Fascist police they might retaliate against his brother.

Then, in April of 1930, Silvestri, in an extraordinary letter to Bellone, made a final break. In it, one can hear the voice of Ignazio Silone:

> My health is terrible but the cause is moral. . . . I find myself at an extremely painful point in my existence. A sense of morality, which has always been strong in me, now overwhelms me completely; it does not permit me to sleep, eat, or have a minute's rest. I am at a crossroads in my life, and there is only one way out: I must abandon militant politics completely (I shall look for some kind of intellectual activity). The only other solution is death. Continuing to live in a state of ambiguity has become impossible, is impossible. I was born to be an honest landowner in my hometown. Life has thrown me along a course that I now want to leave behind. I am conscious of not having done great harm either to my friends or to my country. Within the limits of the possible, I always tried not to do harm. I must say that you, given your position, have always behaved like a gentleman. And so I write you this last letter with hopes that you will not try to prevent my plan, which will be carried out in two phases: first, I will eliminate from my life all falsity, doubleness, ambiguity and mystery; second, I will start a new life, on a new basis, in order to repair the evil that I have done, to redeem myself, to do good for the workers and the peasants (to whom I am bound with every fiber of my heart) and for my country.
>
> If you are a believer, pray to God that he give me the strength to overcome my remorse, to begin a new life, and to live it for the good of the workers and of Italy.
>
> Yours,
> Silvestri

Silone began work on "Fontamara" around this time. The horror of his own betrayals clearly fuelled the moral passion in his novel. The letter adds an important layer of meaning to the central crisis of Silone's life: his break with Communism in 1931. It now appears that this was preceded—and, in a sense, precipitated—by an even more urgent break, with the Fascist police. By announcing his intention to abandon the Party, Silone reduced his usefulness to the police, making it possible for him to slip free.

What remains mysterious is Silone's motive for informing in the first place. He may, however, have left some clues in "Bread and Wine." The book's hero is a sick and disillusioned Communist leader who returns to the Abruzzi and eludes the Fascist police by posing as a priest. The protagonist is clearly an idealized portrait of the author, but Silone may also have represented himself in a second character, a young Communist who confesses to having acted as a police informant. After he is arrested and beaten by the police, the young man, Luigi Murica, is approached by a kindly policeman, who offers to help him in exchange for a little information. Initially, Murica provides only generic reports, but then he is pressured by the police to give more detailed information. He compensates for his betrayal by working harder than ever for the cause, and this allows him, temporarily, to function on two levels at the same time. "An insuperable abyss opened up between my apparent and my secret life," the young man says. "Sometimes I managed to forget my secret. . . . But I was deceiving myself. When my new comrades admired my courage and my activity they reminded me that in reality I was betraying them."

Explaining his decision not to confess to his comrades, Murica says that "fear of being discovered was stronger in me than remorse. . . . I feared for my threatened reputation, not for the wrong that I was doing." Like Silone, the character overcomes his fear by regaining his religious faith, telling himself that "good is often born of evil, and that I would not have become a man without having passed through the infamies and errors committed."

The recent revelations don't diminish the power of Silone's writing. If anything, his heroic image may have obscured the darkness and complexity of his books. Readers who approached the novels as straightforward denunciations of social injustice may have missed the undercurrents of deceit and betrayal that now come into relief. And if Silone no longer seems a man of moral purity, one marvels at his ability to remake himself. He went on to do exactly what he vowed in his last letter to Bellone, "to start a new life . . . in order to do good," killing off Secondo Tranquilli and becoming Ignazio Silone. ♦

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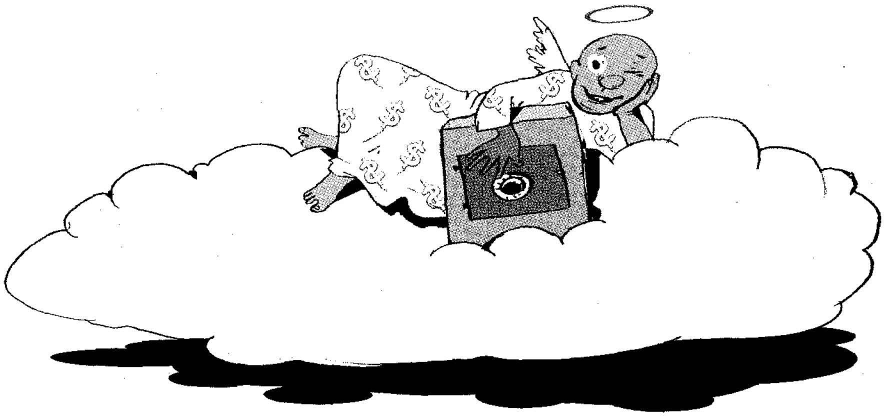
WHAT HAPPENED TO MY MONEY?

BY DAVID OWEN

God has taken your money to live with Him in Heaven. Heaven is a special, wonderful place, where wars and diseases and stock markets do not exist, only happiness. You have probably seen some wonderful places in your life—perhaps during a vacation, or on television, or in a movie—but Heaven is a million billion times more wonderful than even Disney World. Jesus and Mary and the angels live in Heaven, and so do your grandparents and your old pets and Abraham Lincoln. Your money will be safe and happy in Heaven forever and ever, and God will always take care of it.



ISTVAN BANYAI

Your money is still your money—it will always be your money—but it cannot come back to you, not ever. That may seem unfair to you. One day you were buying puts and shorting straddles, and the next day you woke up to find that your account had been closed forever. Perhaps you got a sick or empty feeling in your stomach when that happened; perhaps you have that sick or empty feeling still. You loved your money very, very much, and you did not want God to take it away.

Your feelings are natural and normal—they are a part of the way God made you—but God took your money in accordance with His wonderful plan, which is not for us to know or understand. You must trust God and have faith that He loves your money just as He loves you and every other part of His creation. Someday—probably a very, very long time from now, after you have lived a long and happy life in compliance with the nation's securities laws—God will take you to live with Him in Heaven, too. Then you will understand.

Even though your money is gone forever, it can still be a part of your life. As long as love and kindness and happiness dwell in your heart, your money can dwell there, too. At night, before you go to sleep, you can talk to your money in a prayer. You can think about the B.M.W. that you and your money were going to buy, and you can remember the house on the beach that you and your money were going to build, and you can laugh about your funny old plan to send your children to private colleges. Someday, when you no longer feel as sad as you do today, you may even find that thinking about your money can give you some of the same happy feelings that spending your money used to give you.

Those feelings belong to you and they always will; no one can take them away from you. Even when you are very, very old, you will still be able to think about your money and remember how much you loved it. But you will still not be able to spend your money, or even borrow against it. ♦

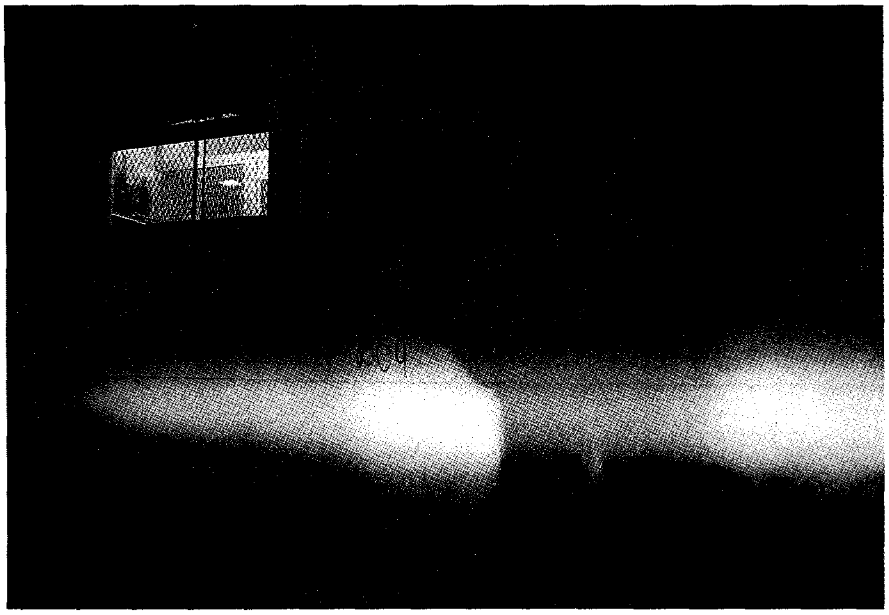
COP DIARY

THE MIDNIGHT TOUR

Working the Edgar Allan Poe beat in the Bronx.

BY MARCUS LAFFEY

When I went to work midnights a few months ago, it was discovered that I didn't have a nickname. You need one, to talk casually over the radio: "Stix, you getting coffee?" "Chicky, did you check the roof?" "O.V., T., G.Q., can you swing by?" Nicknames never stuck to me, for some reason, and I always thought that nicknaming yourself was like talking to yourself, something that made you look foolish if you were overheard. So Hawkeye, the Hat, Hollywood, Gee Whiz, Big E., the Count, Roller Coaster, and Fierce pitched a few:



Memory is short here, but the past is visible all around you—at least, until the present calls you back. It can take time for your eyes to adjust.

"'Hemingway'—nah, they'd know it was you."

"'Ernest' is better."

"Or 'Clancy'—he'd be a good one to have."

"What about 'Edgar'?"

"What from?"

"Edgar Allan Poe."

"What about 'Poe'?"

As I thought about it, the fit was neat: Poe, too, in his most famous poem, had worked, weak and weary, upon a midnight dreary. He moved to New York City in 1844, the same year that legislation created the New York City Police Department. And he wrote the first detective story ever, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which the killer turns out to be a demented orangutan with a straight razor. There is also a brilliant detective, an earnest sidekick, and a mood of languor and gloom—all now hallmarks of a genre that has endured for a century and a half. Poe spent his last years in the Bronx, living and working in a cottage that is midway between where I live and where I work. I am a police officer in the Bronx, where kids sometimes call the cops "po-po." And so "Poe" it was.

Midnights for Edgar Allan Poe seemed less a time than a territory, a place of woefully distant vistas, as if he were stargazing from the bottom of a well. A lot of that has to do with needing sleep, I think. Everyone on the late tour lacks sleep, and this state of worn-out wakefulness while the rest of the world is dreaming tends to stimulate thoughts that meander. Each precinct has a list of "cooping-prone locations," which are out-of-the-way places, under bridges and by rail yards and the like, where bosses are supposed to check to make sure patrol cars haven't stopped in for a nap. The list is posted in the station house, and when you're tired it reads like a recommendation, a Zagat guide for secret sleep, as if it might be saying, "St. Mary's Park, with its rolling hills and abundant trees, offers superb concealment in a pastoral setting—we give it four pillows!" On midnights, we talk about sleep the way frat boys talk about sex. Did you get any last night? How was it? Nah, nah, but this weekend, believe me, I'm gonna go all night long! Although I've asked practically everyone on the tour how long it takes for your body to adjust to an upside-down life, only three people have given precise answers, which were "Two months," "Four years," and "Never." Nevermore.

I went to midnights after my old narcotics team split up. It seemed like a good interim assignment, a way station until something better came along, and I thought I could use the free time during the day. Mostly, you drive around and check things out until a job comes over the radio. There are fewer jobs than during the other tours of duty—although the jobs tend to be more substantial—and even on weekend nights they tend to taper off after two or three in the morning. You usually have to check a few buildings, and you'd probably get into trouble if you never wrote a ticket, but you have more time to yourself than on any other tour. My uncle finished his thirty-three years as a cop working midnights in the Bronx; he would have said that he liked it because the bosses leave you alone. Still, to be back on patrol feels odd sometimes, and when I think about my past and the past of this place I wonder where I'm going. It can bring on a terminal feeling.

One night, I drove with my partner to the corner of 132nd Street and Lincoln Avenue—a cooping-prone location, though that wasn't the reason for the visit—which is a dead end at the very bottom of the Bronx, with a warehouse on one side and a parking lot on the other. Across the black shimmer of the river you can see Harlem, and the salt piles along the F.D.R. The Bronx begins here physically, and it began here historically as well; this was the site of Jonas

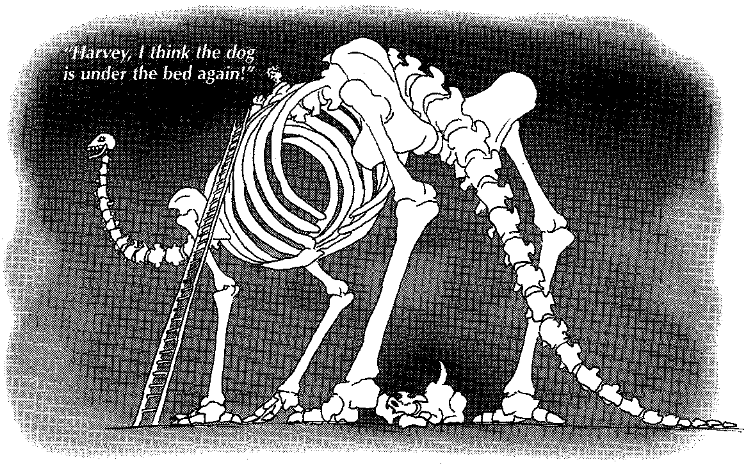
KENNETH JARECKE/CONTACT PRESS

Bronck's farmhouse. Not much is known about him: he was a Swedish sea captain who was induced to settle the area by the Dutch West India Company. A peace treaty signed at Bronck's house ended years of sporadic but bloody skirmishes between the Dutch and the Weckquasgeeks. Bronck didn't have much to do with it, but his house was the only one around. "When did he move?" my partner asked. It was a funny question, because it made me think of the Bronx as a place where people come from but not where they stay, if luck is on their side.

The Bronx was a place of slow beginnings: Bronck came here in 1639 to homestead, and at the beginning of the twentieth century there was still farmland in the South Bronx; it became citified only as the subway was built. A person alive today could have witnessed the borough's entire metropolitan career: two generations as a vibrant, blue-collar boomtown, and one as a ravaged and riotous slum. When Jimmy Carter visited Charlotte Street, in September, 1977, he saw vacant and collapsing buildings inhabited by junkies and packs of wild dogs. A week later, during a broadcast of the World Series at Yankee Stadium, there was a fire at a school a few blocks from the game. Millions watched it as Howard Cosell intoned, "The Bronx is burning." One of my uncles was a fireman here at the time, and he told me that they were busier than the London fire department during the Blitz.

My partner and I cruised up to 142nd Street between Willis and Brook Avenues, a block with a row of little houses on one side and a school on the other. I used to chase a lot of junkies down that street, when they were buying heroin with the brand name President from the projects on the corner. A hundred years ago, the Piccirilli brothers, sculptors from Pisa, had a studio here, where they carved the statue for the Lincoln Memorial, but I don't suppose the dope was named in any commemorative spirit. Four blocks up and two over, Mother Teresa's order runs a soup kitchen and a shelter next to the Church of St. Rita, a boxy old building painted robin's-egg blue. The work the order does is holy and noble, but for us there is something embarrassing about it: nuns reassigned from leper duty in Calcutta to lend us a hand. There was a picture in the *News* a

Stop sleeping on a dinosaur!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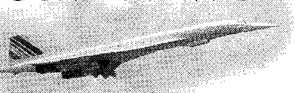

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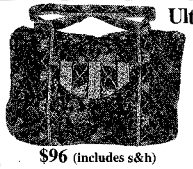

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few years back of Mother Teresa and Princess Diana visiting the mission together, and one of my old partners was there, standing guard, just out of the frame. A little farther out of the frame is the building where Rayvon Evans died: a little boy whose parents kept his corpse in a closet until the fluids seeped through to the floor below and the neighbors complained. No one was ever charged with the murder, because there wasn't enough left of him to determine how he died. There is a garden dedicated to Rayvon, but no sign of the Princess or the sculptors. Memory is short here, but the past is visible all around you—at least, until the present calls you back. It can take time for your eyes to adjust.

Midnights tend to magnify things, to set them in sharp relief against the empty night, like gems on a black velvet cloth. You meet lonely people who seem more solitary and sorrowful at night, such as the chubby little woman who reclined in her armchair like a pasha after attempting suicide by taking three Tylenol PMs. Or the woman with dye-drowned blond hair going green, who denied trying to hurt herself, though her boyfriend confided that she had: "She slapped herself, hard." Domestic disputes are all the more squalid and small-hearted when they take place at five in the morning—like the one between two middle-aged brothers who were at each other's throats hours before their mother's funeral. The place stank and the walls seethed with roaches. One brother had a weary and beaten dignity; he was sitting on the couch with his overcoat and an attaché case when we arrived, like a salesman who'd just lost a commission. The other brother shouted drunkenly, jerking and flailing like a dervish afflicted with some unknown neurological misfiring. They had argued because he had started drinking again.

I took the jerky one aside, to let him vent a little. His room was littered with cans of Night Train; military papers and alcohol-rehab certificates were taped to the wall. As he punched the honorable discharge to emphasize that his had been a life of accomplishment, a burst of roaches shot out from underneath. I wanted to punch his rehab diploma, to show that he still had some work to do, but I thought better of it.

My partner and I knew that we would be back if both brothers remained there, and we dreaded the idea of having to lock one of them up before the funeral, so we asked the sane brother if he wouldn't mind leaving for a while. He agreed that it was the best thing to do; we agreed that it was deeply unfair. He used to work as a security guard, and he offered us his business card. "If there's anything I can do for you gentlemen," he said, and he went out to walk until daybreak.

If some people call because they need someone—anyone—to talk to, there are others for whom we're the last people they want to see. For them, we arrive the way the Bible says Judgment will: like a thief in the night. It felt like that when we showed up to take a woman's children away. We were escorting two caseworkers from the Administration of Children's Services who had a court order to remove the one-, two-, and three-year-old kids of a crackhead I'll call Pamela. The midnight visit was a sneak attack, as she had dodged the caseworkers the day before. We were there—not to put too fine a point on it—as hired muscle.

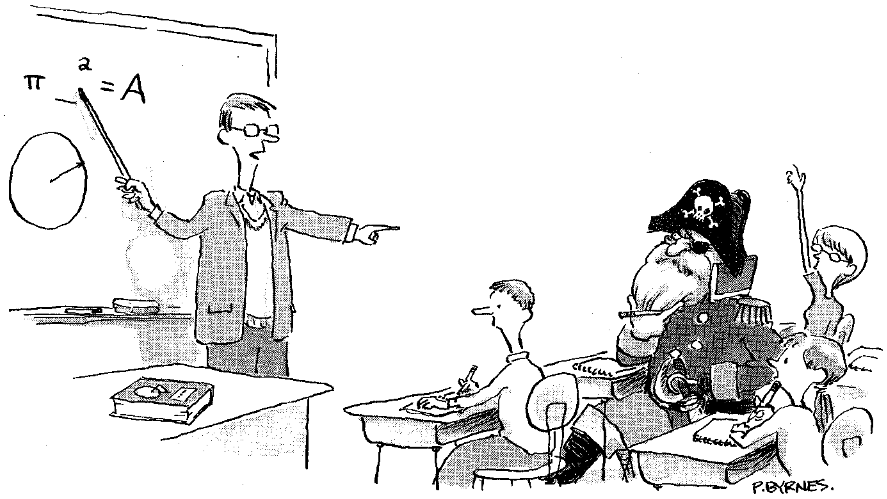
When we knocked, a woman answered ("Who?") and then delayed ten minutes, muttering excuses ("Hold on," and "Let me get something on," and "Who is it, again?"), before surrendering to threats to kick the door down. She was just a friend, she said, helping to clean up—probably in anticipation of such a visit. Pamela was out. Yes, there were kids in the back, but they were Pamela's sister's kids, and the sister was out, too. As we looked in on the sleeping children, another woman emerged from a back bedroom, and she was equally adamant: "But those are my kids, and I'm not Pamela, I'm her sister, Lorraine! I can show you you're making a mistake!"

We grilled both women, but they never deviated from their story, and we could find no baby pictures or prescription bottles or anything else that would tie these children to the case. So when "Lorraine" said she could prove that they were hers if we'd let her call her mother to get her I.D. we agreed, as it would clearly demonstrate whether we were professional public servants doing a difficult job or dim-witted repo men hauling off the wrong crack babies.

But she didn't call for her I.D., she called for reinforcements, and the apartment was soon flooded with angry women. We held the baby boy while Pamela managed to grab the two girls; then a neighbor took one of the girls as Pamela tried to get out with the other, making it all the way into the hall. More cops came, and one started after her, telling her to stop, but a neighbor blocked his way, howling, "Call the cops! Call the cops and have him arrested! He ain't leaving till the cops come and arrest him!"

The sergeant called for backup, and even more cops arrived, two of them running up twelve flights of stairs—but then one had to lie down in the stairwell, and the other was rushed to the hospital with chest pains. The press of angry bodies made the apartment hot, and some women yelled for everyone to calm down, and some women yelled the opposite, and as we tried to dress the crying kids some women tried to help in earnest, finding their jackets and socks, while others were still plainly angling to spirit them away.

When Pamela's last child had been taken, she swung at a cop, but then another cop grabbed her wrists, and her friends took her aside, and after a few more eruptions of screaming we got the kids out. One woman yelled, "This is why people hate the cops!" Although I thought very little of her and the rest of them—Mothers United for Narcotics and Neglect—she had a point: no one likes people who steal babies in the middle of the night. And we had just started our tour.



"Pi what squared? Long John, you should be able to get this."

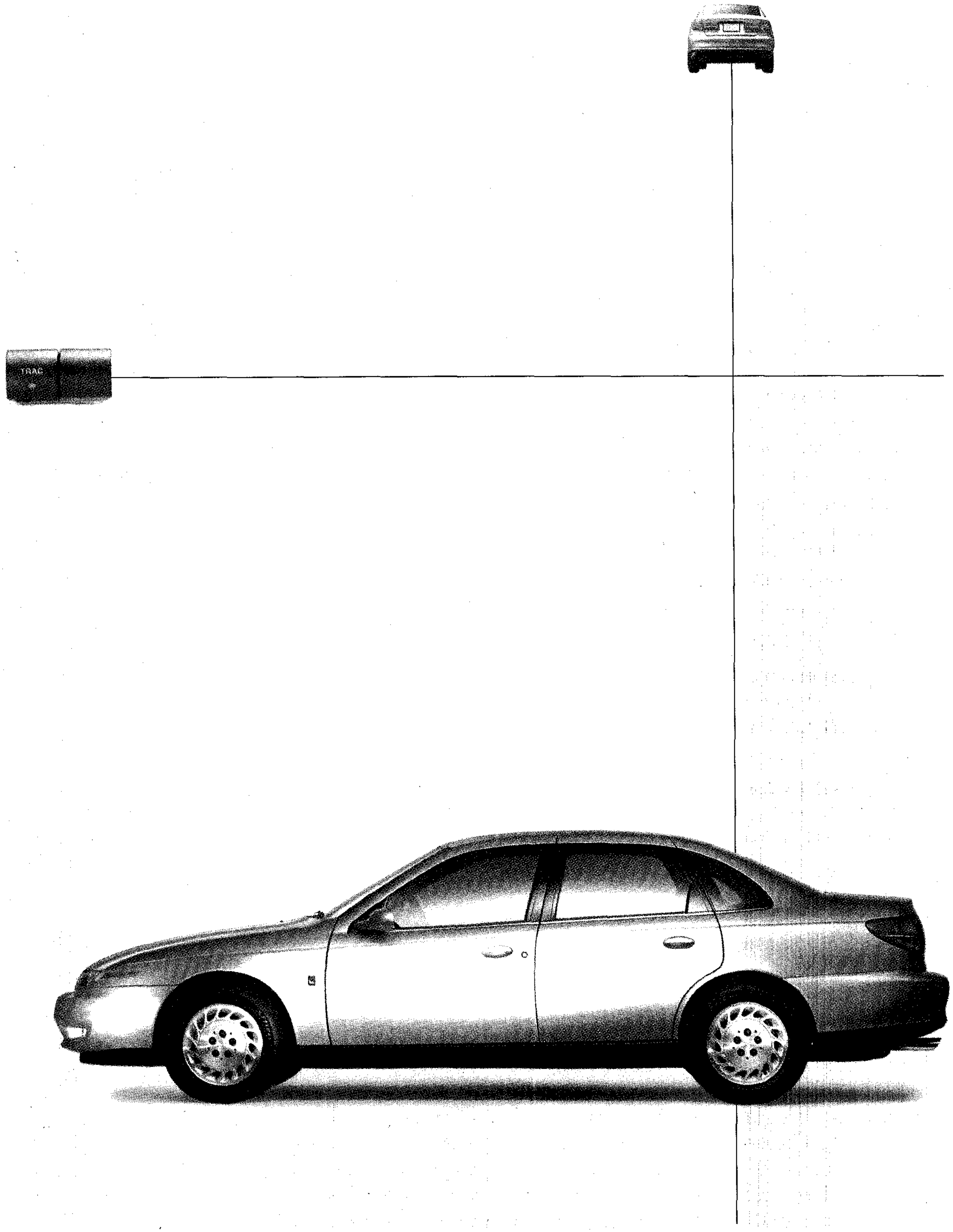
• •

The midnight tour is also called the first platoon, the second being the day tour and the third being the four-to-twelve. You begin at 2315 hours and end at 0750. If you have Tuesday and Wednesday off one week, say, you have Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday off the next, and then Wednesday and Thursday the week after that. It takes some getting used to, because if you're working a Friday you don't come in Friday—you come in Thursday night. Another depressing thing about midnights is that when you finish work in the morning, at ten minutes to eight, you don't say, "See you tomorrow," which would seem soon enough; you say, "See you tonight." Tonight began yesterday, and tomorrow begins tonight, and the days become one rolling night.

When I first went on the job, I started out on steady four-to-twelves, Sunday to Thursday, working in a project called Morris Houses, which, with Morrisania, Butler, and Webster Houses, make up a huge complex of thirty apartment buildings called Claremont Village, in the heart of the South Bronx. On that beat, I was generally busier than I am now, when I might cover an entire precinct. I knew less local lore then, and the landmarks I navigated by were of recent relevance: the pawnshop to check after a chain snatch; the crack house where a baby overdosed; the rooftop where they fought pit bulls, sometimes throwing the loser to the street below. I still occasionally drive through this area with my partner, but even with my grasp of the neighborhood's history I'm not sure why things turned out as they did, and still less what led me here.

Morris Houses was named after Gouverneur Morris, a Revolutionary War hero, who was with Washington at Valley Forge, and later established the decimal system of United States currency, proposing the words "dollar" and "cent." His half brother Lewis was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and tried to get the Founding Fathers to establish the nation's capital on the family estate, but the idea was more or less a nonstarter. The Morrises owned most of the South Bronx for nearly two centuries, and their name is everywhere: Morrisania, the neighborhood in the Forty-second Precinct, where my beat was; Morris Heights; Port Morris; Morris High School, which the industrialist Armand Hammer and General Colin Powell graduated from. Yet I couldn't say it means much to anyone here. The kids that Bernhard Goetz shot in 1984—four thugs who failed to recognize a subway-riding vigilante—came from Morrisania. One of them remains confined to a wheelchair, and I'd sometimes see him around; I locked up another one's sister for robbery, after a nasty girl-gang fight. I can't imagine that her mother said, upon her return from jail, "Gouverneur Morris and his half brother Lewis must be rolling in their graves!" The Morrises made this place and helped make this nation, but they might as well have knocked up some local girls and split after the shotgun wedding, leaving nothing behind but their name.

On midnights, there is a risk of drifting within yourself, trailing off on your own weird train of thought, so that when the even weirder world intrudes it is hard not to laugh. One night not long ago, it was so slow that three patrol cars showed up for a dispute between two crackheads over a lost shopping cart. To pass the time, we conducted an investigation, asking pointed questions: What color was the cart? Do you have a receipt? It was cold, and after a while one of the cops said we should leave. But I was bored enough to want to talk to the crackheads, who relished the attention. I said to the cop, "They have issues, we can



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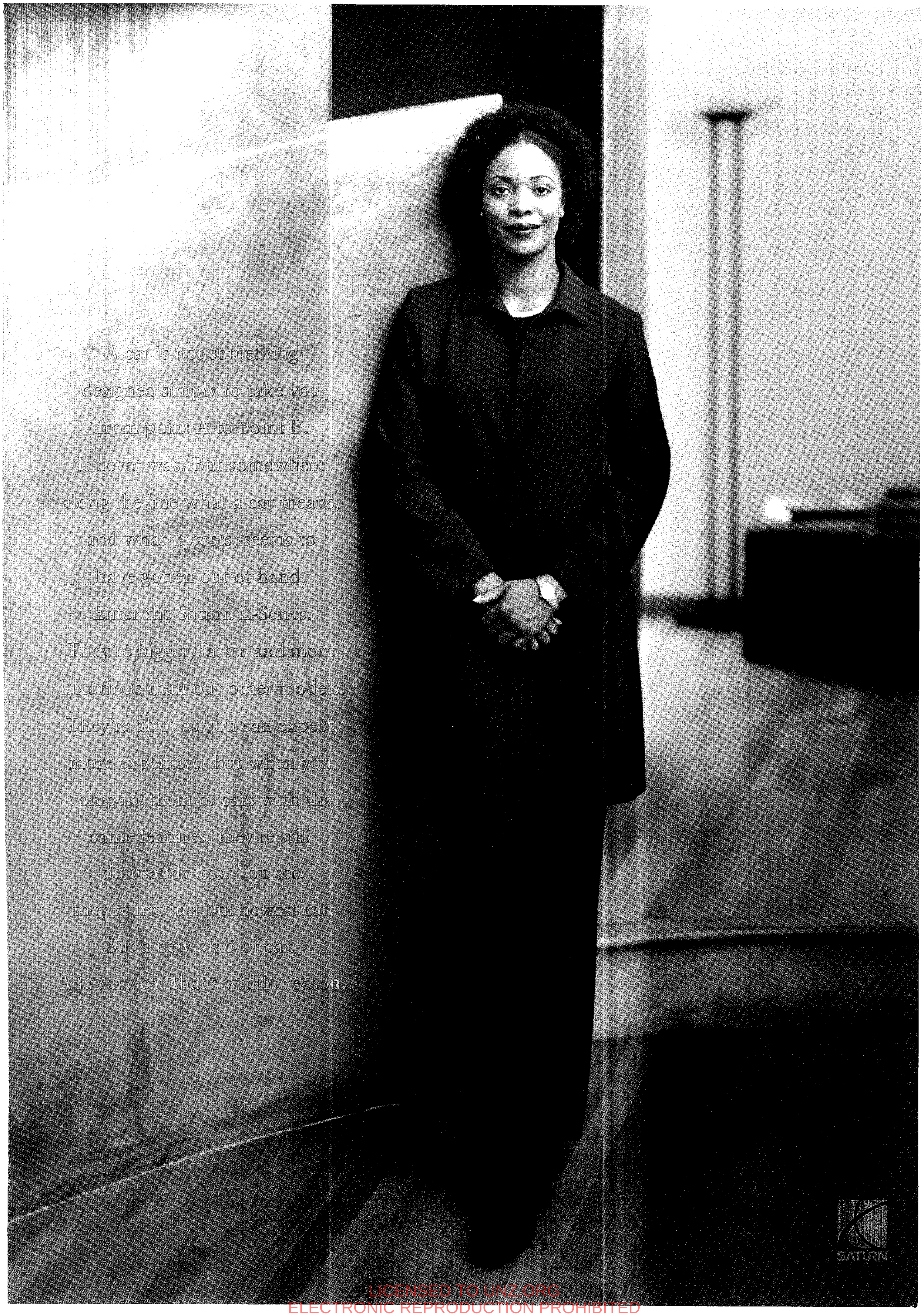

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help them work through them, the relationship can come out even stronger than it was before." He looked at me and said, "Hey, I'm no Dr. Zhivago—let's get out of here."

On another job, we received a call for help from an old man and his sick wife. They seemed like good people: he had an upright, military bearing, and she was a stick figure, with plum-colored bruises all over, gasping through a nebulizer, "*Ayúdame, ayúdame, ayúdame.*" We made small talk, in broken English and Spanish, while waiting for E.M.S. On a shelf, there was a photograph of a young man in a police uniform, who the old man said was his son, a cop in San Juan who died at the age of thirty-four, from cancer. The entire apartment was a Santería shrine: cigars laid across the tops of glasses of colorless liquid; open scissors on dishes of blue liquid; dried black bananas hanging over the threshold; Tarot cards, coins, and dice before a dozen statues of saints, including a huge Virgin Mary with a triple-headed angel at her feet. Suddenly, I thought, They keep the place up, but it's more *House Voodooful* than *House Beautiful.* The line wouldn't leave my head, so I had to pretend to cough, and walk outside.

You get in the habit of reading these scenes for signs, whether forensic or sacramental, of sin and struggle in the fallen world. Santería shrines and offerings are often placed in the corner of a room near the entrance, and in just that corner of one apartment we found a black-handled butcher knife next to blood that had not just pooled but piled, it lay so thick on the floor: dark, sedimentary layers with a clear overlay, like varnish, which I was told came from the lungs. The woman responsible for this handiwork explained why she had tried to sacrifice her brother at the household altar: "Two years ago, he broke my leg in five places. I came in tonight, he sold my couch. He killed my mother. Well, she died from him and all his nonsense." She stopped talking for a moment, and tried to shift her hands in her cuffs as E.M.S. took her brother out in a wheelchair, pale and still. "I didn't stab him," she went on. "He stabbed himself by accident, in the back, during the tussle."

"I honestly don't know what you're waiting for. By the time I was your age, I'd been married twice."

Some objects tell simple stories of fierce violence, like the two-by-four, so bloody it looked as if it had been dipped in the stuff, that a woman had used to collect a fifty-dollar debt, or the rape victim's panties in the stairwell, covered with flies. Others are more subtle and tentative, like the open Bible in the apartment of a woman whose brother, just home from prison, had suffered some sort of psychotic break. "He sat there reading the Bible for a while, and then he just looked up and said he was going to kill me," she said. The Bible was open to Proverbs 1:18, which states, "These men lie in wait for their own blood, they set a trap for their own lives." Maybe he'd read only the first part of the sentence. The woman's husband had just died, and next to the Bible there was a sympathy card from someone named Vendetta.

As a cop, you look for patterns—for context and connections that tell a fuller truth than a complainant may be willing to tell. Sometimes, though, the parts belong to no whole. So it was with a pair of attempted robberies, only twenty minutes and four blocks apart. Each perp was a male Hispanic, tall, slim, and young, in dark clothes, with a razor blade, though in the second robbery the perp wore a mask and a wig. And so when we came upon a tall, slim, young male Hispanic in dark clothes with a wig, mask, and razor in his pocket, in a desolate park between the two crime scenes, I reasonably expected to have solved at least one crime. Both complainants were sure, however, that he wasn't the man responsible, and we let him go.

In such cases, the solution seems out of sight but within reach, like the winning card in three-card monte. But there are other, older mysteries, and if there is a hint of a game in what unfolds you feel more like a piece than like a player. One night, we went to a routine "aided case," an old woman with a history of heart trouble, whose breath was rapid and shallow. She moaned, "Mami!" as she sat on a red velvet couch, flanked by two teen-age girls. As the old lady left with E.M.S., my partner told me that she was raising her two granddaughters. An hour or so later, we had another aided case, a "heavy bleeder." When we went inside, a woman said, "She's in bed," and then, "It's in the tub." We checked on a teen-age girl in the bedroom, who said she was fine, and then looked in the bathtub; there, nestled in the drain, was a fetus the size and color of a sprained thumb. The head was turned upward and the eyes were open and dark.

When the E.M.T.s came—the same guys we'd met on the previous job—they asked for some plastic wrap or tinfoil, and were provided with a sandwich bag to pick it up. As we helped them put the teen-age girl in the ambulance, they told us that the old lady had gone into cardiac arrest and wouldn't make it. Nothing else happened that night, and as we drove around I kept thinking that for everyone who dies another isn't necessarily born. It was late but also too early, not yet time to go home.

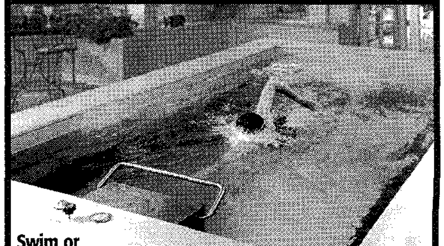
From the sixties through the eighties, the landscape of the Bronx was a record of public failure, high and low—from Robert Moses, who moved through the Bronx like Sherman through Georgia, evicting thousands in order to build highways, to the scavengers and predators who made ordinary life impossible for ordinary people. I've often wondered what Poe would have thought of the South Bronx at its worst—what his ghost would make of our ghost town. He wrote about loves lost to death at an early age, and set his tales in ancestral houses gone to ruin, but he might have taken to the abandoned factories and the tenements whose graffiti-covered walls had collapsed, leaving them open like doll houses. He might have said, "Don't change a thing!" Then again, such a landscape might have left little room for the imagination, or offered too much.

Since then, the landscape has changed for the better, and the record has been rewritten, often quickly and well. Of course, when something returned from the dead in Poe's world no good came of it, like the hideous beating of that telltale heart. On the other hand, the phrase "with a vengeance" does come to mind when I look at Suburban Place, one block from Charlotte Street, which is now the center of several blocks of well-tended ranch houses. There is something surreal about this development, with its fences and lawns, given both the area's past and its surroundings, which are still rough. You could look at it as a plot twist as unexpected as anything in Poe. You have to wait for it, and be accepting of surprise.

One night, we raced to the scene of "shots fired" from an elevated subway platform—a call that E.M.S. workers had put over as they were driving past. A number of passersby confirmed it, but the shooter was long gone. Four hours later, with little to do in the interim except drive around in the dark, we received another job of shots fired, from an apartment right next to the El. Inside, a lovely old couple pointed out a hole in the window, and the neat chute that the bullet had cut through a hanging basket of African violets, littering stems and leaves on the floor. "I love my plants, they're my babies," the woman said, more concerned about what had happened than about what might have happened.

The woman was a kind of grandmother to the neighborhood, and had been for more than a generation. There was a picture on the wall of her with Mayor Lindsay, who she said had let her have a house for a dollar a year to take care of local children. "Give your plants a big drink of water," I said. "And I'll play them some nice soothing music, too," she added. We saw where the bullet had hit the back wall—not far from Mayor Lindsay—but then had to dig around in the kitchen for a while before we found it, under the refrigerator. The heat and speed and impact had transformed the sleek missile into an odd-shaped glob, like a scoop of mashed potato, harmless and pointless. It was a big slug, probably from a .45, and had she been watering her plants it would have taken her head off. It frightened her, to be sure, but she had slept through its arrival and she would sleep again now that it was gone.

The bullet had taken less than a second to travel from the barrel into the couple's home, but in my mind the journey had taken four hours—from when the bullet was heard to when it was found—and I could picture it in slow motion, floating like a soap bubble on a windless night. Both perspectives seemed equally real, the explosive instant and the glacial glide, and I was glad to be able to see each of them, in the luxury of time. The old couple, I'm sure, were glad of it as well. My partner and I took the bullet with us, and morning arrived as we left. ◆



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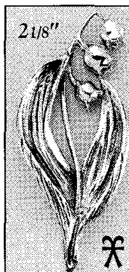

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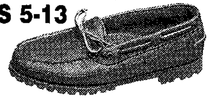

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LETTER FROM AFGHANISTAN

ACROSS THE DIVIDE

What do the Afghan people think of the Taliban?

BY WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN

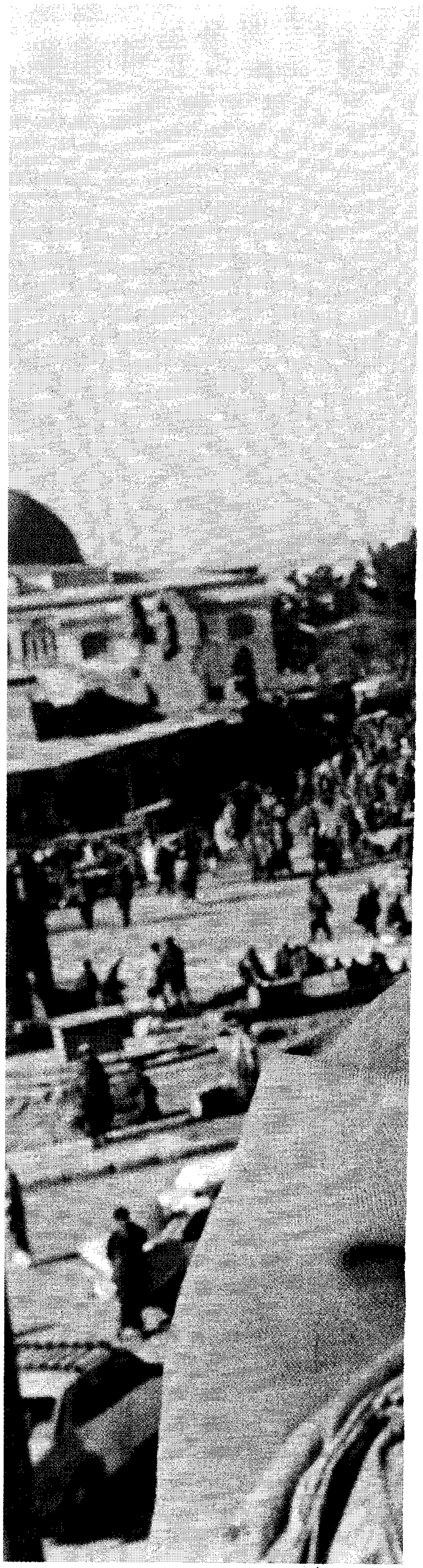
Descending the Khyber Pass from Pakistan, one enters a tan-colored desert that resembles the tough interior membrane of a pomegranate—a wearying, lifeless place. Emerald wheat fields, trees shining with figs and oranges, and armies of snowy hills present themselves from time to time, but the region is mostly sand, pebble heaps, and drum-hard earth, tramped down by glaciers and soldiers. I remember gazing into that desert from Pakistan, back in 1982. The Afghan insurgents I was travelling with had shown me a Soviet sentry box and the road behind it that went on into infinity. It was a reasonably good road then. By the time I returned, last January, hardly a scrap of asphalt remained on its bomb-cratered, potholed track.

I had never driven down it before. In 1982, my companions had led me over the mountains from the Pakistani town of Parachinar in order to avoid the Soviet garrison. Now this border crossing was open. After eighteen years, I was going back to a country that had been my symbol of heroism—a place where poor peasants had risen up against arrogant and cruel invaders and washed them away with their own blood. Those invaders had been gone for a decade. The new government, run by members of the fundamentalist Islamic movement known as the Taliban, was literal-minded and stern, like the freedom fighters who'd inspired me years before. It was despised by much of the Western world, but I wanted to know what the Afghans, who had to live with it, thought.

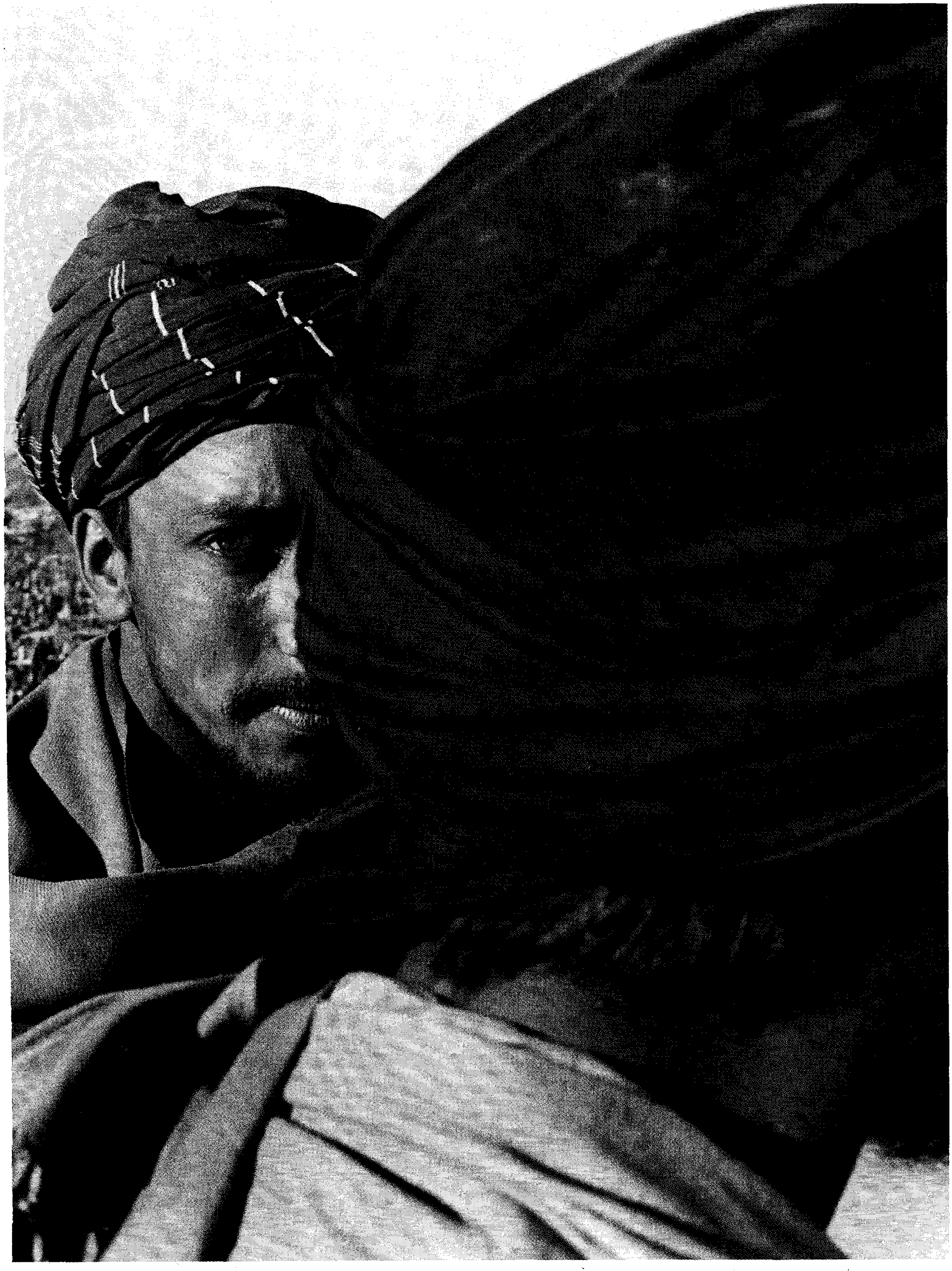
My translator and I changed money in the border town of Torkham, got a taxi, and rattled down into Afghanistan. For scenic attractions, we had the stumps of a razed orange grove, wrecked Soviet tanks, and refugee mud villages, abandoned now and crumbling into dust. There were warnings of land mines, and once in a great while a listless-looking man could be seen far off on the dreary plain, dragging a golf-club-shaped mine detector through the rocks. I saw virtually no usable habitation, not even a tent. Nevertheless, every few hundred yards there'd be a dirty boy or girl waiting by the side of the road. As our taxi approached, the child would sink a shovel just far enough into the dirt to collect a few clods, then dribble them into the nearest pothole, pretending to improve the road for our journey, hoping for payment. A burning stare, a shout, and then we were on our way to the next beggar.

If I stopped and gave money to a child, others came running. I slipped one boy five thousand afghanis—about ten cents—and when I looked back in the rearview mirror it seemed that the other boys were practically tearing him to pieces. On a road bend where no other beggar could see, I gave a twenty-dollar bill to a boy who stood beside the carapace of a Soviet armored personnel carrier, and he took it and held it as if he were dreaming. I wanted him to hide it before anybody else came or the wind took it from him, but the last I saw of him he was still standing there with the banknote dangling from his hand.

It was like this most of the way to Kabul, some hundred and twenty miles from the border. Inside the capital's war-pocked walls, beggar women and children would wait outside the windows of restaurants, crowding against the glass and drumming on it desperately. If I sent a plateful of food out to them, they'd fall on it in the same way that skates and manta rays occlude their scavenged prey—guarding it with their own flesh while they eat. When I left the restaurant and got into a taxi, the children would try to climb in, too. I couldn't bring myself to slam the door on their hands, so the taxi would roll down the street with the door open, gradually increasing speed until they had to let go. Once I went out alone at dusk, and an army of children fell upon me, clawing



Taliban in Kabul: The regime was particularl



arsh on the inhabitants of the city, which it perceived as decadent, and where initially it met resistance. Photograph by Edward Grazda.

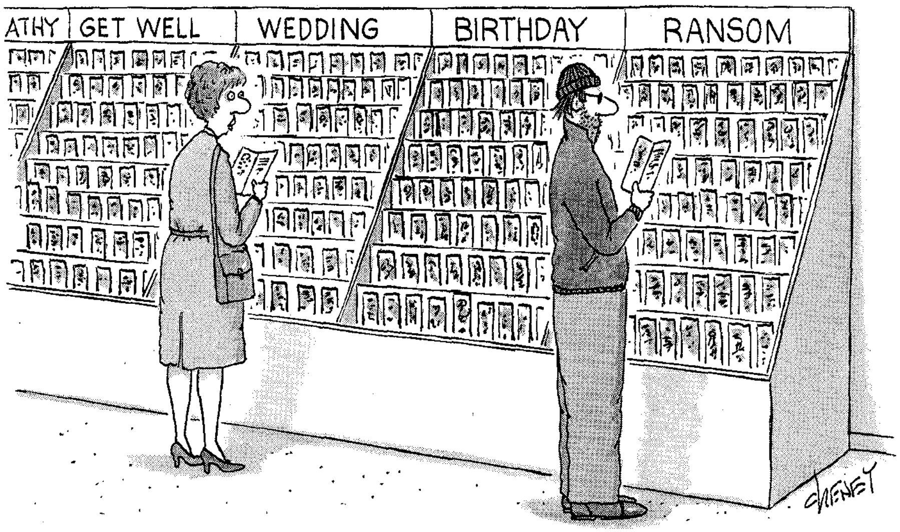
at me for money, shouting obscenities, and laughing that the Taliban would kill me because I wore bluejeans instead of the stipulated shalwar kameez—a long shirt and baggy pantaloons. They were the children first of war and then of poverty, growing up hungry and ignorant (although some of the boys claimed to go to school), with not much either to amuse them or to make them hopeful.

But I must have been missing the point: in Pakistan, where I'd spent almost three weeks waiting for an Afghan visa, people had rhapsodized about the quality of life in Afghanistan. Several Afghan women teachers I met in a refugee camp expressed admiration for the Taliban—even though under Taliban rule they wouldn't be allowed to teach. A Pakistani government official in Islamabad said that he adored the Talibs. And in the border city of Peshawar, where I stayed in a six-dollar hotel, the clerk, a gentle, bad-complexioned boy, who came to my room every evening to answer questions about the Koran, told me, "Afghanistan is now the most perfect country in the world." Times had changed. In 1982, every Pakistani male I met had wanted to be photographed. But although this boy trusted me, he refused to let me take his picture, because the Taliban had decreed that doing so broke the rules of Islam.

THE VOLUNTEERS

In Afghanistan's deserts, plains, and valleys live many ethnic groups—the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Hazaras, and others—who greet strangers with a welcoming hand on their hearts and devote themselves with equal zeal to blood feuds. The mountains stand sentinel between them, and each group tends to keep to itself. Thanks to Islam, each sex likewise keeps itself apart from the other. So Afghans live both separately and inwardly, whether they sleep in tents or wall themselves away in fortresses of baked mud. They are watchful, hospitable, yet withdrawn, magnificent and vindictive, kind and lethally factional, untiringly violent. In the fierce stewardship of their honor, Afghans sometimes remind me, despite their religious differences, of the Serbs. But, unlike the Serbs, they are repelled by the concept of nationality. Each group tells its own stories—the Caucasian-looking Pashtuns bad-mouthing the Asiatic-looking Hazaras, and vice versa—and "government" operates in a distant dreamland where houses have electricity, women can read, and officials flaunt the money they've extorted from the people. What unites the Afghans, if anything, is the monitory, glorious religion of Islam.

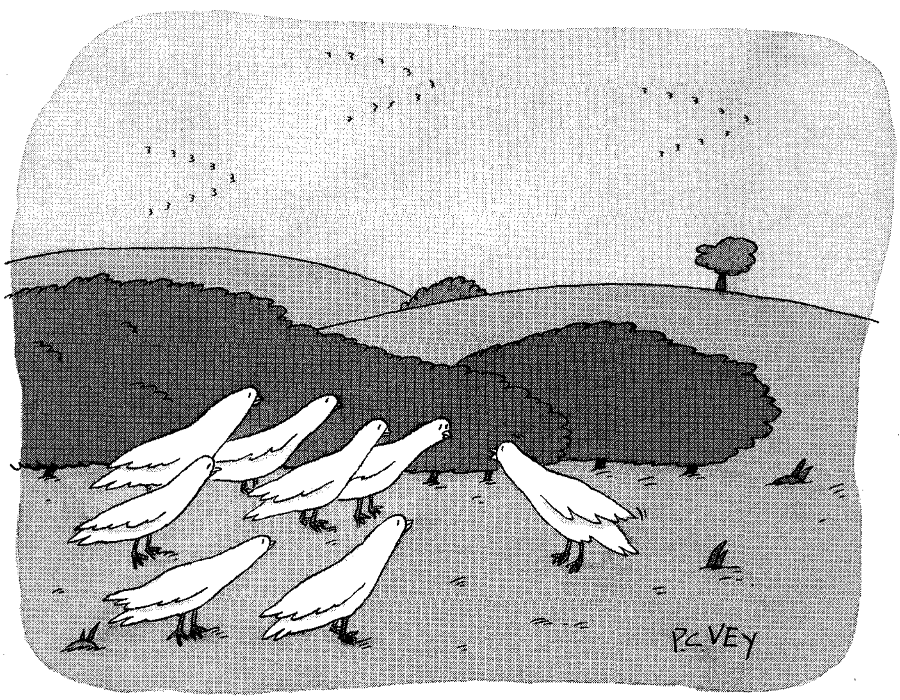
It follows, then, that those who do not pray, or who pray to other gods, must stay forever beyond the pale, while those who believe as the Muslim does, no matter what their color, language, or nationality, are his brothers and sisters. This is why Muslim zealots call for a worldwide Islamic state, and why the Iran-Iraq War was infinitely more distressing to Muslims than any conflict between two Christian nations would be to us in our easy secularity. (So ingrained is this notion of Muslim kinship that the very few secret Christians of Afghanistan, who risk imprisonment to hold clandestine Bible readings at home, unfailingly embraced me and called me "brother.") Therefore, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, in December, 1979, fighters came at once from Saudi Arabia, and, to varying degrees, from Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Tajikistan, and other Muslim regions. There may have been some thirty-five thousand of these nominally foreign volunteers.



Afghanistan had been far from stable before the invasion. The long-standing Afghan monarchy had been overthrown in 1973, in a military coup led by a cousin of the king, Muhammad Daoud. Then, after five years in power, Daoud and seventeen members of his family were killed by pro-Soviet Afghan leftists, who planned to achieve their own form of utopia by forcibly de-Islamicizing the countryside. By the time the first Russian troops arrived, a year later, those Communist Afghans had been largely discredited among the masses, who resented their atheism and cruel vanguardism.

Ironically, the Soviet invasion did much to unite Afghanistan. The country's many tribes and factions banded together to proclaim a jihad, or religious war, against the Soviet infidels. And the United States helped to arm these insurgents. In those days, they were "freedom fighters" to us, not "terrorists." They called themselves mujahideen, or holy warriors, but to the C.I.A. the religious aspect of the jihad was irrelevant—the war was "strategic," a good way to get back at the opposing chess team in Moscow.

When I went to Afghanistan in 1982, I supported the struggle in every way that I could, because it seemed one of the clearest cases I had witnessed of good versus evil. The mujahideen were certainly not guiltless then, but the deeds of the Soviets were unspeakable. They raped women in the name of emancipating them. In the defense of national security, they machine-gunned illiterate peasants who couldn't have found Moscow on a map. They burned people alive and drowned them in excrement. They razed villages, slaughtered livestock, and destroyed harvests. They even scattered mines disguised as toys, to lure people to their own maiming. In 1982, I saw several of these mines lying, unexploded, on the ground. Between a million and two million Af-



"It's such a nice day I think I'll walk."

ghans were killed in that war, ninety per cent of them civilians. (Of the more than six hundred thousand Soviet soldiers sent to Afghanistan, fewer than fifteen thousand were killed.) The Afghans I met at that time were bright-eyed with fervor. Sick refugees said, "Tell America not to send medicine. Send guns." In the secret insurgent base where I stayed, not far from the Pakistani border, a commander told me, "I am not fighting for myself or even for Afghanistan. I am fighting only for God."

On February 15, 1989, to the world's amazement, the Soviets marched out of Afghanistan. The Afghans had won the war! Within a few years, they had ousted the Russians' last show ruler, President Muhammad Najibullah, and installed in his place a white-bearded Islamic scholar named Burhannudin Rabanni. But, instead of putting war behind them, the mujahideen—who had now organized themselves into seven factions, constituted, in customary Afghan style, along geographical, tribal, and sectarian lines—trained their weapons on one another. Each camp struggled for supreme power in Kabul, some supported by puppetmasters in other countries—Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and, perhaps, the United States—transforming the war for liberation into a bloody and protracted civil war.

With the factions locked in battle like fighting beetles in a jar, five years went by and, according to one estimate, twenty thousand people died. Then, in 1994, the residents of Kabul heard a rumor from the south. It seemed that a group of young men—Islamic students, or *taliban*—had risen up in Kandahar, Afghanistan's second-largest city, which was then proverbial for its lawlessness. In the name of Allah the Beneficent, these Taliban, as members of the movement came to be known, had slain, captured, or driven off every criminal. Then they had confiscated all weapons, promising that they themselves would provide protection for the citizens. The streets secured, they applied Islamic law as they saw fit: they banned photographs, education for girls, and music. They demanded that women cover their faces in the street and leave home only in the company of a close male relative. All men found themselves required to grow beards and could be sent to prison for ten days if they shaved. In keeping with the Koran, the Taliban amputated the right hands of thieves. Kandahar was now so safe, it was said, that anyone could leave a bar of gold in the street and it would be there three days later.

The origins of the movement are murky. It reportedly began with forty Talibs, but no one could tell me how quickly other Afghans decided to join them. Their leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, who'd lost an eye in the jihad, was reputed to be a quiet, simple man, although it was also said that he enjoyed a legal complement of three wives, one of whom was rumored to be as beautiful as any princess in the Arabian Nights. The fact that almost nobody was allowed to meet him enhanced his mythic stature. Some claimed that Mullah Omar and his followers were soldiers of the old king, Zahir Shah, who'd been deposed more than two decades before and was now in exile in Italy. Others suspected that they might be fanatics who meant to take away what scant freedoms remained in Afghanistan. But they were not rapists or wanton murderers like the other fighters, and most Afghans, paralyzed by decades of war, withheld judgment, as the Taliban spread to other cities and provinces, calling upon each man in their path to lay down his weapons in the name of Allah. For the most part, they were received with respect, even love: they brought peace. "I was proud to give up my arms," a tea-shop proprietor I met told me. "I started my jihad for an Islamic Afghanistan, and so we succeeded." Every time the Taliban disarmed others, their own arsenal grew.

In a few places, however, they encountered significant opposition. It took the Taliban cadres several attempts to conquer the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, which was then occupied by a former mujahideen general. The first time, the Taliban were invited in and then betrayed, thousands of them killed in cold blood. Their second attempt to take the city was repulsed. The third succeeded, at which point the Taliban are said to have murdered a thousand civilians. (I heard this figure go as high as five thousand. In central Asia, as in every other part of the world, atrocity statistics are always suspect.) A Hazara former civil servant told me that after the massacre he had seen stray dogs eating human flesh in the streets, and stacks of corpses, "like piles of firewood."

The Taliban also encountered resistance in Kabul, which, when they arrived in 1995, was still under the control of President Rabanni and his most famous general, Ahmed Shah Masoud, a brave and brutal Tajik fighter. The resistance that Masoud mounted against the Talibs in Kabul, together with the city's perceived decadent cosmopolitanism, made the Taliban especially harsh on the people there, once they had won control.

Still, by 1998, the Taliban had conquered about ninety per cent of Afghanistan. Despite their frequent attempts to complete the takeover—which are said to have caused as many as forty thousand casualties—the other ten per cent, a swath of land in the northeast of the country, remains under the control of Masoud, Rabbani, and their supporters, who call themselves the National Islamic United Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, and are also known as the Northern Alliance.

A MARRIAGE FOR THE MILLENNIUM

Do you believe
that Progress is a woman?
A spirit seeking for its opposite?
For a true marriage to ease her quick heartbeat?

I asked you this
as you sat with your glass of red wine
and your newspaper of yesterday's events.
You were drinking and reading, and did not hear me.

Then I closed the door
and left the house behind me and began
driving the whole distance of our marriage,
away from the suburb towards the city.

One by one
the glowing windows went out:
Television screens cooled down more slowly.
Ceramic turned to glass, circuits to transistors.

Old rowans were saplings.
Roads were no longer wide.

Who are the Talibs who are running Afghanistan now? They are Muslims, only a little more so. At five-thirty every morning, they don black, white, or green turbans and go to the mosque like other Afghans. (The muezzin, whose beautifully quavering song calls everyone to prayer, is now most often a Talib.) They come home and read the Koran or the hadiths—the recorded sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad—until sunrise. Afterward, they take tea. They go to work. Some Taliban are shopkeepers. Some work at the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

Fifteen minutes after I arrived in Kabul, I met one of these worthies (my translator, awed and anxious, warned me how powerful he was). He was walking down a snowy street, across from a park in which children were playing. Kabul is high and cold—a ruin surrounded by mountains—so poverty is more lethal there. Men struggle to support their families, selling their belongings for a little food. They lurk on corners, looking for buyers. When I greeted the Talib, he instantly invited me home for tea. His responsibility at the Ministry was to police the front lines for anti-Taliban sentiment and to insure that all the soldiers wore beards and refrained from smoking opium. He also investigated cases of Talibs who misused the signature turban in order to extort money. He and three colleagues who shared his house—two young men, one shy older man—sat with me on the floor of a bleak concrete room. They treated me with the usual Afghan politeness—handshakes, the most comfortable cushion, hands on their hearts. Even when they learned my nationality, their courtesy did not flag.

Diplomatic relations between our countries were suspended in 1998, when the United States bombed bases in Afghanistan that it claimed were run by Osama bin Laden, a Saudi-born former mujahid, who United States officials believe was responsible for the 1998 bombings of American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. Later, when the Taliban refused to hand bin Laden over to American justice, the United Nations imposed sanctions. Now most of the Afghans I met hated the United States, and they withdrew from me a little in dignified sadness, but they still, like these four Talibs, spoke with me and invited me into their homes.

The concrete walls of the Talibs' room displayed nothing but cracks; all emblems were prohibited. Even their Korans were wrapped lovingly out of sight. When I unclothed mine, in order to ask them some textual questions, tears started in one man's eyes. They wanted to help me learn. A space heater waxed and waned, according to the vagaries of that day's electricity. As we sat and chatted, they scrupulously filled my tea glass. We passed the time. I asked how I might go about interviewing a woman, and they said that they could arrange a conversation through a black curtain, but once I pressed them they retreated, and after some discussion they concluded that to speak with any female I would first need to get permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I told them not to trouble themselves further in this matter, and their spirits lifted.

We talked about the jihad. All four had been mujahideen. The three younger men had spent their childhoods wandering in and out of Pakistan, as their families changed refugee camps according to the latest military reverse or factional split. When they were about ten years old, their fathers had enrolled them in madrasahs, or religious schools, the only remaining institutions of learning in the country. (This was, and is,

Children disappeared from their beds.
Wives, without warning, suddenly became children.

Computer games became codes again.
The codes were folded
back into the futures of their makers.
Their makers woke from sleep, weeping for milk.

When I came to the street we once lived on
with its iron edges out of another century
I stayed there only a few minutes.
Then I was in the car, driving again.

I was ready to tell you when I got home
that high above that street in a room
above the laid-out hedges and wild lilac
nothing had changed

them, nothing ever would:
The man with his creased copy of the newspaper.
Or the young woman talking to him. Talking to him.
Her heart eased by this.

—*Eavan Boland*

the way to become a member of the Taliban.) There they were taught Islamic law without ambiguities: Cut off the thief's hand. The woman must cover herself. How much of herself must she cover? The Koran doesn't tell us exactly, so make her cover everything! Such an edict is easy to enforce. This is army life, and these boys were soldiers. Every summer, they would take up their Kalashnikovs and shoot at Soviet tanks or gunship helicopters. They were taught that if they fell in battle they'd go to Heaven. After the war, they returned to their religious studies, and, when they heard about the corruption of the former mujahideen and the emergence of the Taliban movement, they travelled to Kandahar to enlist.

"Were you feeling happy, or did you simply feel compelled to do your duty?" I asked the man who'd invited me to tea.

"So happy! We volunteered," he replied.

"What was the first thing you did in Kandahar?"

"We instituted Islamic law."

"And were the people pleased?"

"They gave us flowers and money."

Later, a little awkwardly, he pulled up the baggy cotton legs of his shalwar kameez and showed me the scars on his legs from fighting for the Taliban. He had spent a month in the hospital. Smiling, half proud, half ashamed, he gazed down at his wasted purple flesh.

On my innumerable trips between Peshawar and Islamabad to obtain an Afghan visa, I had travelled through the little Pakistani town of Akora Khattak, the site of the most famous madrasah, Darul Uloom Haqqania, where the three younger Talibs had studied. The madrasah stands right on the main road, and an armed guard lazes outside its high white walls. About thirty per cent of the current Taliban leadership, including the Ambassador to Pakistan and the Foreign Minister, have passed through the school's spiked iron gate. The rank and file study there by the thousand.

The head of the school was in Libya on the day of my visit, so I met with his son, Rashid ul Haq, the editor-in-chief of the militant Islamic monthly *Al-Haq*. If anyone could help me understand the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law, or Shariah, I thought, it was he. We sat on the carpet of an inner room, attended by bearded, shining-eyed men in prayer caps or turbans.

"What makes the Taliban government different from that of other Islamic states?" I asked.

"You have seen the other countries," ul Haq replied, "but the others are living not according to the Koran but according to their own choice."

"Why have the Taliban made beards compulsory for men?"

"All prophets have beards," he said. "So we want to have beards. Some of the people, you know, live their lives according to the hadiths."

I wondered if he knew how unpopular this edict had become. As slang for "I left Afghanistan," some Afghan men had begun to say "I shaved the beard." Surgeons especially hated the rule, because in their own compulsory beards dwelled their patients' worst enemies: microbes.

"And why is music forbidden?" I asked.

"Islam does not permit it. People who sing create the thing that causes cowardice. And when a person spends his time in singing he loses his time."

"And what about the prohibition on images of people and animals?"

"In the hadiths, the picture is forbidden for the man," ul Haq said, and later added, "But Islam allows it when there is a need, as for visa photographs and pictures on currency."

I had just interviewed two Afghan brothers in a nearby refugee camp who loved the Taliban, except for one thing. Their father had been martyred in the jihad, and all they had to remember him by was a small photograph. They told me that if the Taliban ever found it they might tear the picture into pieces.

"And exactly why does Islam say that such pictures are forbidden?"

"We do not want to see the logic of this talk," one of the other Taliban interjected. "What the Koran says is right. The logic is present."

The Western notion that the Taliban imposed themselves by force on an unwilling population is less than half true. Six years after that first unexpected uprising against the bandits of Kandahar, when one might well expect the Afghans to be heartily sick of any regime in whose name their misery continued, many people I spoke with expressed contentment with the Taliban. Why? Quite simply, because they could not forget how bad it had been before.

Afghanistan was never rich. During the war with the Soviet Union, men used to fight over the scrap iron of Russian bomb casings even as other bombs fell upon them; one entrepreneur actually posted mujahideen slogans in the desert so that the Soviets would bomb them and he could collect the metal. And, by the time the Taliban marched onstage, the civil war had made matters worse.

In a long, thick-walled teahouse in the Abrishini Gorge, on the main road between Jalalabad and Kabul, I sat cross-legged on a concrete platform and ate oiled chicken and bread while a middle-aged former taxi-driver told me how it had been in that vacuum of years between the Soviets and the Taliban. Pointing down at the gray-green river, he said, "That was where they took my two passengers."

Back then, in this part of the country, ex-mujahideen gunmen had established roadblocks every kilometre or two, where they would extort money from the taxi-driver's passengers. One night, when the taxi-driver reached one of these roadblocks, the men gestured with their rifle butts and summoned two men from the back of his car. The driver watched them being frog-marched into the gorge, and then the gunmen told him that he could go. His remaining passengers urged him to resist, but he was terrified. Fortunately, the two kidnapped men were released, although, of course, they'd been stripped of their possessions. The driver never forgot his helpless fear and shame. That was why he revered the Taliban. Not a single one of those checkpoints remained in the Abrishini Gorge: now Talibs sat tranquilly beside machine guns, gazing down at the road from their stone forts.

"You know how hard it is to take the weapon from Pashtun people," one Talib had said to me proudly. "Ninety per cent of the Afghan people now live in weapon-free areas."

"If things keep getting safer," the former taxi-driver said, "I don't care about not being allowed to listen to the radio."

"My two sons were both martyred by Masoud," an old beggar woman in Kabul had told me—illegally, since it was against the law for her to talk to me. "One lay for forty-seven days in a well. My husband was also martyred when the Masoud people stole his car. Now I'm looking for food in the streets. At least the Taliban won't kill me."

"They are better than everyone," another beggar woman said.

How many Afghans truly felt as those women did? Predictably, when the happiness over the restoration of peace wore off and the poverty and hardship remained, some of the gratitude soured. On the street in Kabul, late one cold evening, I met an old night watchman with a long snowy beard. All five of his sons had died in the jihad, he told me. To lose five children—I can hardly even understand the grief, and one must understand it, or at least try, if one wants to come close to experiencing the terrible reality of Afghanistan's misfortunes. One must also consider the plight of the homeless orphans—there are so many of them—and of the hungry widows and the brideless boys. "I have given my children and my brothers for this country," the night watchman added. "Now look at me. I am doing this job for my food only, and it is very cold. What kind of life is this?"

His words were not quite an indictment of the Taliban. I've met many human-rights advocates who, exasperated with the regime's judicial and extrajudicial abuses, rushed to lay blame on Mullah Omar's cadres for everything else—the short life expectancy in Afghanistan, the extraordinarily high infant-mortality rate, and so on. The fact is that the Afghan countryside was always unclean and unhealthy; people have always died young. To me, it is indicative of the regime's popularity (or, in some cases, of the fear that it inspires) that more Afghans do not denounce its turbaned agents of perfection.

But some do. Whereas the jihad and the civil war had harmed the population almost indiscriminately, Taliban policy has created a smaller, more specific class of victims. More than two-thirds of Mullah Omar's cadres are Pashtuns, who make up about fifty-five per cent of the general population, and several of the other ethnic groups feel a certain chill in the air. Some were victimized during the Taliban takeover. Many of the civilians killed by the Taliban in Mazar-i-Sharif, for instance, were Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. Some are discriminated against by the Taliban for religious reasons; the Hazaras, who comprise about eight per cent of the population, tend to belong to the minority Shia sect of Islam, whereas most Pashtuns are Sunnis.

Women, particularly urban, educated women, have suffered some of the most painful consequences of the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law. Many who had lost family members in the jihad or civil war then lost their jobs under the Taliban—along with their freedom of movement and dress—and now have no means of supporting themselves; most are forced to beg.

In the opinion of a Kabuli boy, who resented this strictness—he could not get enough work and was the sole source of money and food for the women in his family—forty per cent of the people support the Taliban now, but only five per cent are true members.

"How can they keep control?" I asked.

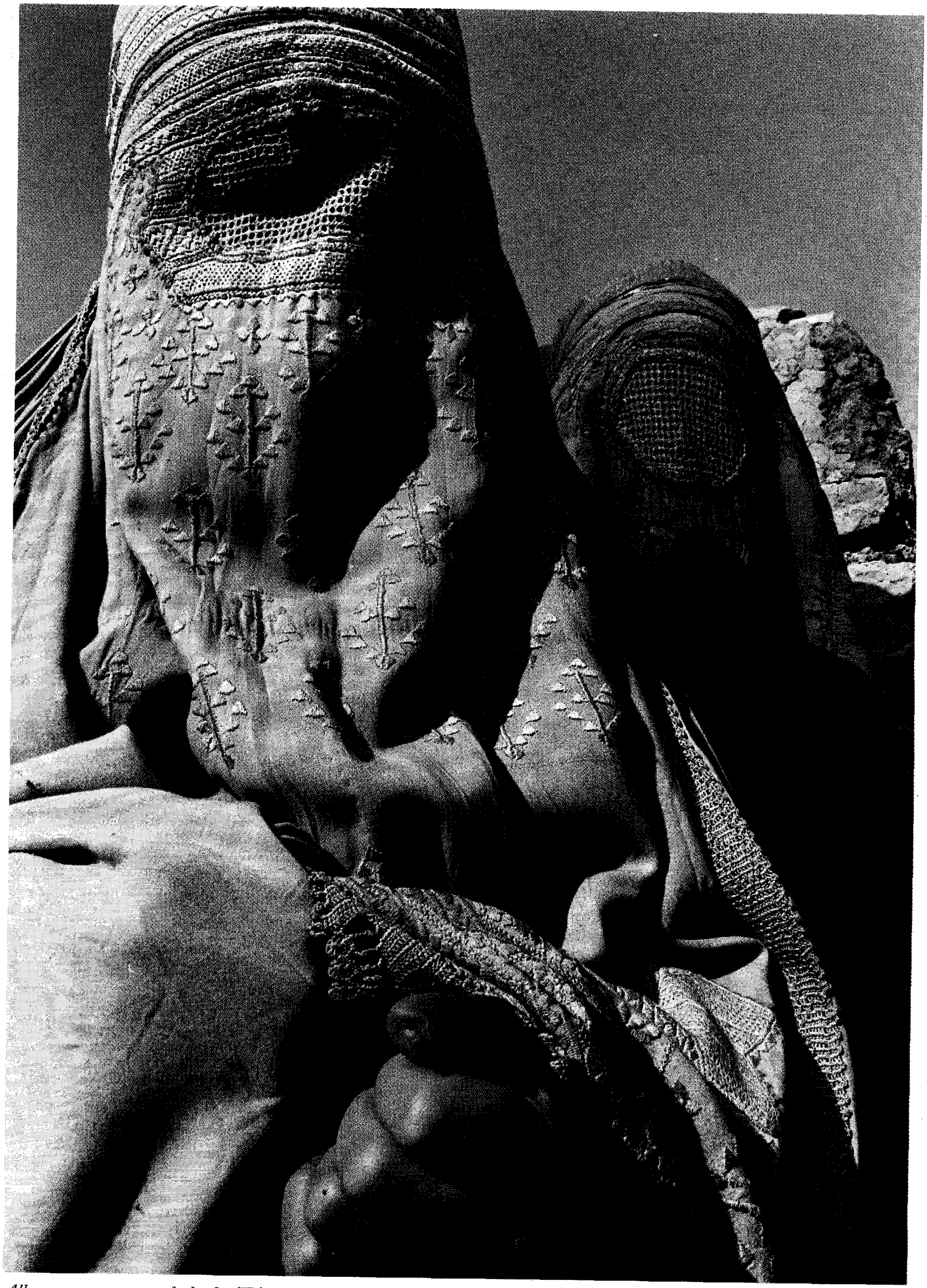
"They have Kalashnikovs," he said.

THE WOMEN

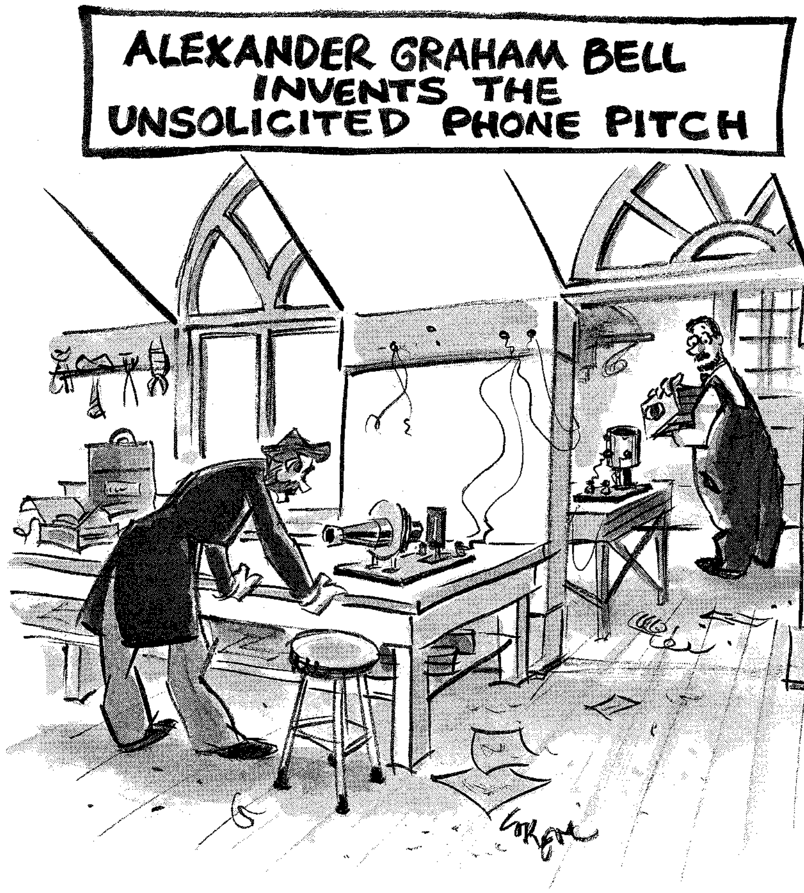
Jalalabad, a city forty miles west of the Khyber Pass, has a rural feel, with long strings of laden camels on the main streets and packed-earth dikes curving crazily through the wheat fields just outside town. Amid the city's wide, slow streets of rickshaws, bicycles, and very occasional cars, I saw boys bearing metal trays of eggs on their prayer-capped heads. The ringing of bicycle bells, the tapping of hammers, the splash as a man emptied a pot of water in the street, the clip-clopping of horses—all these sounds enriched the air, as did the scent of the fresh oranges and the fat, nearly scarlet carrots that lay everywhere on venders' tables. Here came a woman in a green burka—the head-to-toe veil required by the Taliban—holding a dirty little boy by the hand. A woman in a blue burka, whose pleated wake streamed behind her as she walked, carried a baby girl wrapped in a blue blanket. Nothing seemed wrong; it could have been Peshawar, except that the air was less sulfurous and the rickshaws were not adorned with the faces of Indian movie actresses.

To be sure, the scene was overwhelmingly male; after the two women had

LAIF



All women must wear the burka. This woman was beaten for painting her nails. Photograph by Christian Jungeblodt.



"Mr. Watson, have you ever thought what would happen to your loved ones if you died tomorrow?"

passed, I saw only men on bicycles, with white prayer caps and brown or gray blankets. But maybe in this, too, Jalalabad was not so different from Peshawar. The wife of my driver in that city never went out except to visit her close relatives; her husband and sons did all the shopping in the bazaar, because (her husband explained) once or twice nothing would happen, but if she went a thousand times alone, why, sooner or later she might cross glances with some bright-eyed young boy and wonder how his kisses would taste.

One Tajik Afghan woman I met in Peshawar spoke for herself. She had fled the capital for Pakistan the year before. "The first day the Taliban entered Kabul, all the people were in a state of panic, especially us women," she told me. "The first announcement was that all women must cover their faces with a black cloth. Later, they decided that we should use the national burka. The teachers went to school just to sign their attendance sheets, then went straight home. I was formerly in charge of the literary programs of Radio Kabul. For about six months, I stayed at home."

On the subject of female employment, the Koran clearly states, "For men is the benefit of what they earn. And for women is the benefit of what they earn." The Taliban got around this by continuing to pay male and female schoolteachers the same munificent three or four dollars a month they got before but prohibiting the women from working in exchange for their salaries. With the exception of doctors and nurses, professional women in Afghanistan were no longer allowed to exercise their vocations.

"And after six months what did you do?" I asked.

"As the Taliban didn't have qualified workers, they had to use some of the former employees, even some women, to help them." She gave me a bitter flash of teeth. "They had to, because they were not fully literate."

"What's the worst thing they did?"

"My worst memory is of when they beat a poetess, a friend of mine. I was not the eyewitness. My friend went shopping one day and wanted to buy some fruit. When she needed to pay the fruit seller, she lifted the burka to see the money in her purse, and suddenly a Talib began beating her with a whip. For about one week, she was in very critical condition."

"What did the fruit seller do?"

"Nothing. He could do nothing. No one defended her."

"And what incidents of this kind did you personally see?"

"Well, I went together with another lady to get our salary from Radio Kabul, and one of my female friends, when she got the salary, thought no one would hurt her, and she opened her burka to count the money in the yard. Then suddenly a Talib whipped her." She cleared her throat and added, "The person distributing the salary was an old man. So they took him into the street and beat him also, two or three times. He kept silent. They asked him, 'Why do you let the ladies show themselves like that?' "

In the most orthodox galaxies of the Muslim universe, the admiration of women's faces is thought to distract men from their duty, to tempt them to fornication, adultery, and rape, and, in cases of obsessive love, to cause them to ascribe, blasphemously, divine qualities to their beloved. "Say to the believing men that they lower their gaze and restrain their sexual passions," the Koran warns. "And say to the believing women that they lower their gaze and restrain their sexual passions and do not display their adornment except what appears thereof. And let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms."

In Malaysia, a head scarf is often considered sufficient to obey this edict. In Pakistan, however, as you move north and west the weight of seclusion falls more heavily on overt femininity, until by the time you reach the North-West Frontier Province, where the Khyber Pass leads to Afghanistan and the Pashtuns live in mazelike compounds of plaster and baked mud, almost every woman one sees on the street is a generic ghost in a burka or a shroud. In Afghanistan, a man may speak with a strange woman under almost no circumstances. If a beggar woman on the sidewalk stretches out her hand, he may put money in it, but looking directly at her or communicating with her for more than a second or two is indecent. Should any friend invite him home—and Pashtuns are the most hospitable people I've met—then sweets and tea will be presented by the host himself, who brings them from behind a closed door.

Travelling in this area, I often thought of the words of an old major general, a kindly, respected, and powerful Pashtun, who took me into his household in 1982. After I had stayed with him for some weeks, he brought me from the guesthouse into the sanctum, where I met and even conversed a little with his wife and daughters. He was still alive when I returned to Peshawar this year. Since I'd seen him last, he had endowed a hospital with separate entrances for men and women, a boys' high school, and a girls' high school. He said to me, "A woman is a housewife. She raises your children, she gives you food, she keeps everything in order. Can you do as much? Of course not. That is why you must respect her." On another occasion, when we were talking about the Western custom of dating, he said, "How can a boy be so cruel? He takes a girl and he uses her like a football. Then he kicks her away to the next boy. Poor girl!"

Fatana Ishaq Gailani, a politician and the wife of a famous mujahideen leader, detested the Taliban, but when I asked her how she felt about the sura, or Koranic verse, regarding head-covering she replied, her voice rising, "It is for the *safety* of the woman. It is *kindly* for the woman. We are so happy we are a Muslim woman."

"The Taliban are giving rights to the woman," Rashid ul Haq had insisted. "That right is to live safely in their homes." He added, "Right now, if a single woman wants to go anywhere in a village without fear, she is free to do so."

That was true, I suppose, if we discounted the fact that doing so alone was illegal. But ul Haq did not see this as a contradiction, perhaps because in the countryside the Taliban's edicts are almost unenforced. Just outside Jalalabad, one sees raised paths subdividing wheat fields into arcs and polygons in which men and women work together and the women rarely wear the burka; indeed, since they are sweating and stooping so much, their heads often remain uncovered. The Taliban has scarcely altered the lives of uneducated women, except to make them almost entirely safe from rape.

A baffled and angry Talib asked me why the American media worry so much about the tiny number of Afghan women who had actually belonged to the educated labor force. And from a practical point of view he had reason to be mystified. But the aspirations of those Afghan city women he dismissed had been utterly dashed.

According to a 1997 United Nations report, less than a quarter of the women in Pakistan can read, whereas almost half the male population is literate. Women receive twenty-one per cent of the national income. We can assume that in Afghanistan the figures are even more skewed. In Kabul, I looked through the shattered windows of a girls' school that had closed long ago, during the civil war.

"Why don't they open it now?" I asked a Talib.

"Because the war is not yet over," he explained. "We need to protect the ladies."

"If a Talib sees a woman wearing a head scarf but no burka, what will happen to her?" I asked a man in Kabul.

"She will be whipped. If they see girl and boy talking together, they will take them to the stadium and lash them."

"How many times have you seen that happen?"

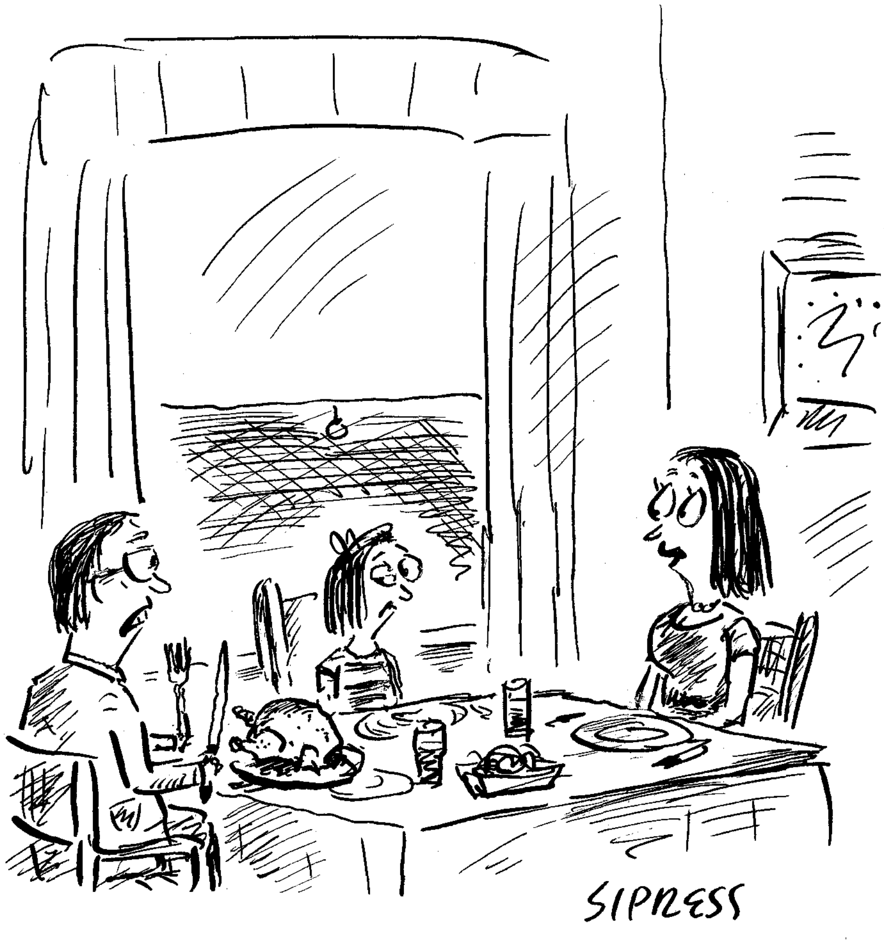
"One. She was speaking with boyfriend. And they punish her in the stadium. They lash the woman. Make her sitting down, and lash her through the burka."

"How many days afterward was she likely to remain injured?"

"For two, three months. Some die from this action."

"Do they punish boys or girls most often?"

"Mainly girls. Boys can run—boys can escape from them," he said, adding shyly, "I have heard that in America



"I don't know, sweetheart. Perhaps Daddy can tell us if chickens have souls."

the girls can walk uncovered even above the knee. It is true?"

It was strange to think that in the seventies, before the Soviets and the Afghan factionalists destroyed it, there had been a Kabul University, that some of the students there were female, and that some of them even wore miniskirts.

In Peshawar, I met one of those former cosmopolitan girls from Kabul. She had been a member of what the Soviets would call the "possessing classes"—she had a baccalaureate in electrical engineering and had been an employee of the Ministry of Civil Aviation. One might imagine that a person with such advantages would enjoy some protection from war. But by the time I met her she was a beggar and a prostitute. She was twenty-three and looked forty. She told me that, six years before, she had been walking home when troops commanded by a former mujahideen general, Rashid Dostam, entered Kabul. By that time, more than half the city had been destroyed by bombs, and the ruined houses resembled the jagged undulations of the mountain peaks around the city. As the girl was crossing a bridge, four armed men rose up. To save her honor, she pounded on the door of the nearest house and was sheltered by the man who lived there, at great risk to him. After some hours, she assumed that the soldiers had found somebody else to rape, but the moment she appeared on the street they fired a rocket-propelled grenade that wounded her in both feet. Luckily, the man took her back in, and she later returned home. I said that her family must have been relieved to see her. Staring at me wide-eyed, she replied that her father had been killed a year or two before that. Her mother died later, in the fighting between Masoud and the Taliban. The girl had hung on until the edict against female employment ended her government job, and she was forced to beg and prostitute herself to survive.

It was a sharp-edged and pointless story no matter how it ended. A silence ensued, and then the woman remarked that at one time she had known how to speak a little English and Russian. Exhaustion and hunger had injured her memory. She was half broken. She was one of thousands.

In the ruined parts of Kabul, I spoke with a number of other beggar women. For the most part, these interviews were quick and almost sordid, like acts of prostitution. The taxi waited with the motor running; if any Taliban came, I could always speed away. "What if I were to bring one of those women back for tea?" I asked my translator once. "You cannot," he said. "First of all, look at these Taliban behind us." (I looked and suddenly saw a whole squad of them, long-bearded and dark-eyed, in their green turbans.) "And, second of all, it's illegal." Every single time (except in the case of one Hazara woman), the woman would say that she supported the Taliban regime because it was better than any other in recent memory. Then I'd give her money, and we'd flee our separate ways, for fear of the Taliban.

In Jalalabad, a man told me that a beggar woman had come up to him and wept, "Don't you recognize me?" She turned out to be his elementary-school teacher. Then he, too, had burst into tears and given her all the money he had. She was almost inexpressibly sad and furious at the Taliban. The beggar women I met in Kabul, though, either were not educated or had suffered terrible things at the hands of previous factions. Or perhaps they just feared to tell me the truth. I will never know how they really felt. But they spoke to me without shame and let me photograph them through their burkas as much as I liked, and even see their faces if I asked to.

On the sidewalk beside a destroyed department store in Kabul, a blue burka stood looking at me, and I heard a young girl's laughter inside it. Next to the blue burka, a yellow burka was begging, its inhabitant also young, or so I guessed by the speed and mobility of the movements within it. Side by side they stood chatting, their faces shining vaguely through the mesh. It was a chilly day, and a steam of pure-white breath came from them. What were they saying? They gestured within their shrouds, then sat down on the sidewalk, and suddenly their burkas flowed together, forming a tent beneath which the girls could meet face to face. To the girls, no doubt, what they were doing was quite ordinary. To me, it was nearly a revelation. Now the one in blue separated herself, then raised her burka over another girl, maybe her little sister, who was so young that she could go about with her face uncovered. I could see, within the warm and secret tent, the two heads moving together, maybe whispering—no, they were sharing food! Remembering the story of the Tajik woman's friend who'd been beaten for raising her burka to count money, I realized that this must be the only way for women to eat in public. There was something mysteriously amoebalike in the way the blue tent rippled as the two heads touched beneath it, the mouths tearing at bread or a scrap of chicken.

This transitory zone of female privacy struck me as ingenious. Perhaps, under the best of circumstances, it might become an actual shelter, like the red-carpeted rooms into which Afghan men retreat to sit on soft cushions, unwrapping themselves from their tawny blankets. In those rooms, the men hatch business schemes and tell tall tales about their deeds as mujahideen, while outside the plastic-sheeted windows prayer songs emanate from loudspeakers. If the men are not Taliban, they boast about the women they've spoken to on the telephone—human nature being what it is, men and women court as they can. A young man in Kabul gleefully pointed out to me how a woman in a blue burka showed her ankles; she was wearing fancy socks. He said, "When you are living in a society with the burka, when you see even her hand, you think maybe she is beautiful." Another young man said, "Some of my friends have girlfriends, if the girls' parents are democratic. They talk to them by telephone. Taliban cannot listen, because our phone system is primitive. So it goes like this: She will come to the corner at such and such a time. That way, she will see the boy, although of course the boy cannot see the girl. But if she likes his face, then maybe some go-between can bring him her photo." And a taxi-driver proudly confided that he was carrying on an affair with a beautiful beggar woman; he'd pick her up in his car as if she were a passenger, and no one suspected.

So much of Afghan life occurs in secret. A young woman I met in Jalalabad had, in defiance of the edict against female education, taught herself English by book and radio. Now she was thinking of organizing an illegal home school.

I'm told that women often smuggle heroin and other contraband because they feel immune from search—no women are still employed by customs to search them. What other dreams, successes, and business dealings take place in that world beneath the burka?

I have promised not to say where I met the brave girl, or who she was, but I can tell you that she lived in Kabul and that her family was cosmopolitan and affluent. They had chairs in their apartment, and they seated me at a table laden with pastries, apples, and oranges.

The brave girl's father had given me permission to meet her, and I asked her how she had felt when the Taliban came. She said, "At that time, I thought they were mujahideen. Then when I learned that they hated people, especially women, I knew that they understood nothing about civil rights, especially human rights. When a person hits a woman on the street, what must that person be thinking? It is against humanity."

"And have they improved at all?"

"I never used to go out even to the bazaar," she said. "But now I think their behavior has been affected by humans. Really, I don't have any clear idea about them. Of course, they started a hospital for us, but what about the other women who stay at home without anything to eat?"

She and I were, of course, not alone together. Her father sat on the sofa beside her, listening with increasing disapproval. Her husband sat across the room; he was angry at me for seeing his wife, whose dark hair and eyes were not covered. There were also two male cousins, my translator, and me. By now, they were all shouting furious interjections at her, and the thought crossed my mind that perhaps they had never really put themselves in their own women's shoes. She bit her lip and lowered her head whenever she contradicted her father.

"Do you believe that the Koran requires you to wear a burka?" I asked her.

"No, I think there is no need to wear the burka," she said bitterly. "I myself don't like it, because I think I'm a human. Because I have my human rights. And it's difficult to see, especially for the girls who wear glasses—all my friends agree."

"Do you have anything else to say about the Taliban?"

Twisting her hands in her lap, she

TAKES

RICHARD MERKIN

I was no longer angry at Merle for the half-dozen interviews he had skipped out on. I no longer cared about his naïve, contradictory politics and his often wayward opinions on human nature and social evolution. His tortured marital history, his confused business affairs dropped away, and all that mattered was his evocations of the heart. I was back in a bar near my home, in Montana, in 1974. My ancient crate of a Ford, which almost always started, was parked in the rutted lot in a cold night rain, and I was dancing, damn drunk, with a damn-drunk girlfriend, our arms draped across each other as we shuffled around in the small space next to the pool table. The song we danced to was "If We Make It Through December." ("Everything's gonna be all right, I know. It's the coldest time of winter, and I shiver when I see the falling snow. If we make it through December, Got plans to be in a warmer town come summertime, Maybe even California. If we make it through December, we'll be fine.") The sad notes, the hopeful words filled the bar, and my partner began crying on my shoulder. I thought for a moment that she had finally fallen in love with me, but by the time the song ended I realized that she had fallen in love with Merle. Or Merle's song. Or a lost love. Or the idea of the next love. I drove her home. We hardly saw each other after that, and we never danced again, but I've been listening to Merle ever since.

I looked up, back in the little room off the studio, and Merle had finished singing. He took his earphones off, and went to stand beside John Abbott, in the control room.

"Let's save that one, just in case it's good," he said.

—Bryan Di Salvatore
"Ornery" (Profiles), February 12, 1990

said, "Peace is the most important thing in our country."

"Can you tell me about something you have experienced that might—"

"But she cannot go anywhere!" her father interrupted testily. "She has seen nothing until now."

"May I take your photo?"

"No!" they shouted—all of them except her. She smiled sadly. When I thanked her, she covered her face and went back behind the closed door.

PUNISHMENTS AND OTHER STRINGENCIES

Again and again, I was faced with contradictions, with the question of how to balance the feelings of the people for whom the new regime was a welcome kind of peace against the rights of those for whom it was a form of oppression.

I remember a sallow boy who hated the Taliban and whispered hideous details of punishments he'd witnessed in the stadium at Mazar-i-Sharif: a thief's right hand severed with a scalpel (by a doctor; it took ten minutes); the shooting of murderers. He claimed to have seen about thirty executions over the last two years—not because he had to but only "to see something new." Without music or movies or magazines, one might as well go to watch the punishments. Once he had seen a couple stoned for adultery. "They were in one bed, and Taliban see them. First, judge begin with one stone, then all of the people hit them with stone. They cry—they cry! Very high cry."

"How long did it take?"

"I think for one hour or one and a half hours, maybe two hours." He went on, "It's too bad, in my opinion. I feel the Taliban are wild. Please, I never tell any other foreigner these things. You are my brother. Please, dear brother, you will not tell them what I say? Because they will cut off my head!"

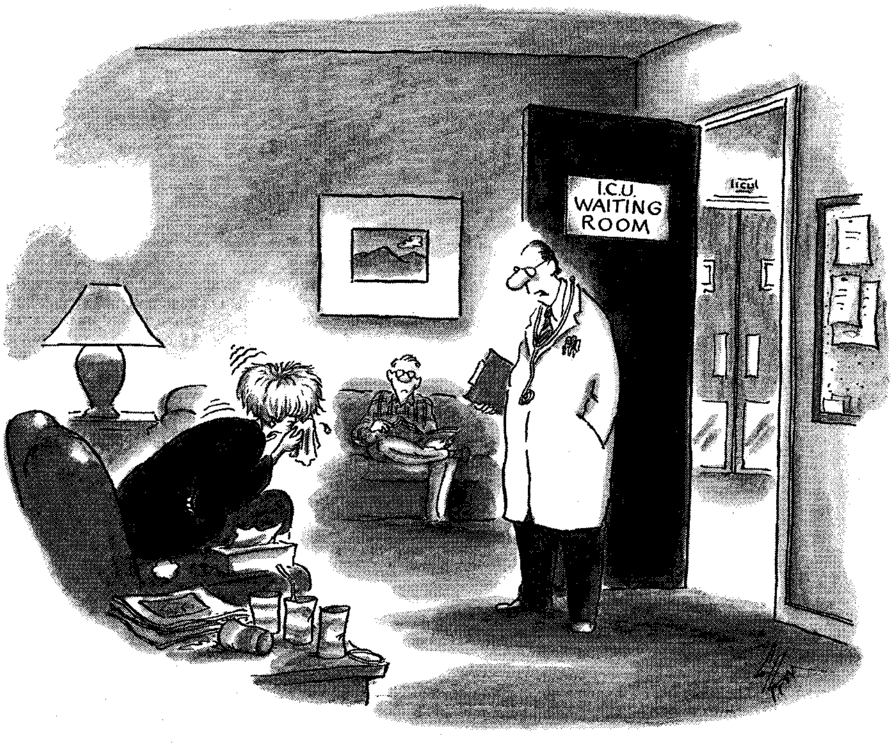
He went to the door of his room to see if anybody might be listening. No one was.

"What do you think?" he asked me.

"I don't know what to think," I said. "I'm only a Christian. Those punishments you speak of, they're all here in the Koran. What do *you* think?"

He took my Koran in his hands and began kissing it, agonized, whispering, "Koran is a very, very good book."

Afghans insist upon the Koran's absolute legitimacy in all walks of life—as an ethical guide, a primer on hygiene and food preparation, a marriage manual, a tax code, a dress code, a body of criminal law. In that last capacity, it clearly conflicts with several articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Afghanistan signed in 1948. The stoning of adulterers presumably falls under the category of "cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment or punishment"; the constraints on relations between the sexes violate the declaration's "right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association"; and so on. But if a believing judge sentences a believing thief to lose his right hand it is none of my business.

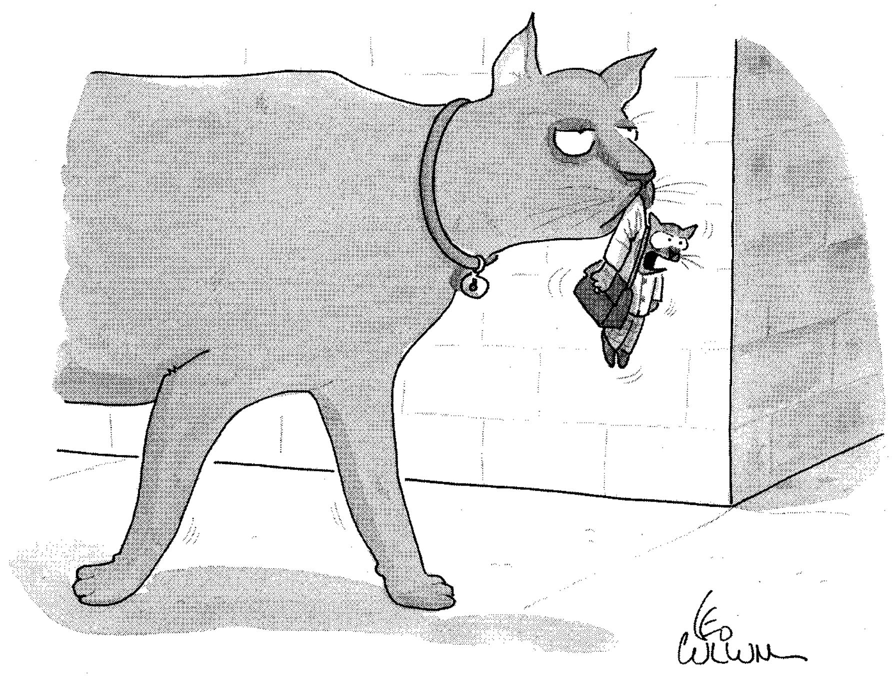

I.C.U.
WAITING
ROOM
I.C.U.

"He was doing just fine till he choked on one of those flexible straws."

There are times, however, when the Taliban rulers winnow from the hadiths the most punitive interpretations of Islam. In the Koran, we read over and over that the compassion of Allah forgives transgressions in emergencies. A man in Kabul, who had just served a prison sentence for having defied the prohibition on images, told me about a scene he had witnessed: a thief whose right hand had already been cut off had stolen again, and so the Taliban cut off his left foot. Afterward, when they were beating him in prison, he shouted, "If you cut everything off I will continue stealing with my teeth! *Because I have nothing to eat!*" Yet the punishment was still carried out. And why was it that the boy who told me those tales of public penalties enforced on legally convicted criminals found it necessary to scutter to the door every minute or two, terrified that someone might be listening?

"They misuse the Koran," the woman who had worked for Radio Kabul insisted. "In the Koran, it is not written that even for pilfering you must cut off the hand. No, the real meaning of that verse is metaphorically cutting the hand from robbery, for instance through imprisonment." Her argument is somewhat plausible; the Koran explicitly warns against literal interpretations. But I assume that the allegorical suras are not the laws. Otherwise, why not say that the requirement to pray five times a day or to keep Ramadan can be satisfied metaphorically?

I am not a Muslim; I have read the Koran only twice. I needed to question a Talib whose authority allowed him to take some responsibility for legal questions of right and wrong. The Minister of the Interior, Mullah Abdul Razzaq, was kind enough to see me without advance notice.



"This is humiliating. Couldn't you drop me a block from school?"

After being searched by Kalashnikov-adorned young cadres at the entrance to the Ministry building, I was conducted upstairs and through halls where Talibs flurried around my foreignness. When the interview was over, I gave a chocolate bar to the dirtiest, hungriest-looking one of them. He was wearing a T-shirt that said "Oakland Raiders." When I told him that the Oakland Raiders were American, he was crestfallen, and the others all laughed at him. He did not seem to know what the chocolate bar was, although I had bought it in Kabul, at one of the few fancy stores still in existence. He peeled off the foil wrapper with a filthy thumbnail, then stared at the chocolate in amazement, while the other Talibs gathered around, crowding so tightly against me that I could hardly breathe.

In the inner offices, however, a glacial decorum reigned. Ten farmers involved in a land dispute sat silently around a stove, wrapped in blankets, while the official to whom they'd referred their case was seated at a low coffee table, his great desk swept clean behind him. Beyond them lay an unheated conference room, and then a sanctum with carpets, cushions, and a little bed, where perhaps the Minister of the Interior took catnaps when he had to work all night. I took off my shoes and sat down on the floor to wait for him.

Mullah Abdul Razzaq is said to have been one of the founders of the Taliban movement. Of course, he'd fought bravely in the jihad and attended the madrasah. He'd been captured by Dostam during one of the battles for Mazar-i-Sharif. I had heard that he could be very emotional, but he and his colleagues entered the room calmly. His turban was white, and his black beard was very long. The other Talibs in the room bowed and nodded when he spoke, and his hands gestured slowly, serenely, in his lap.

"Why did you decide to become a Talib?" I asked him.

"It is said in the Holy Koran that when there is crying and corruption the people should fight against that," he said.

"As Minister of the Interior, you are in charge of security. Who controls crime in the streets, the police or the Taliban?"

"We control the crime," he said. "We control every department."

"What is the most frequent crime against the Shariah?" I asked.

"The Taliban have full control," he replied. "Right now, there is no crime."

A police officer I met in Kabul, a twenty-seven-year veteran, had written a letter for me to smuggle to distant relatives in California, and he whispered that the Taliban had robbed the police of their power. Possibly he and his colleagues had been corrupt before, as is frequently the case in Third World countries where the salaries of officials are so low that their only hope for survival is graft. If so, then Taliban rule might have been a change for the better. On the other hand, one can easily imagine the impatiently righteous graduates of the madrasahs preferring lampposts to courtrooms. There had been highly publicized instances of this already: on the night that the Taliban entered Kabul, Afghanistan's former President, the pro-Soviet Najibullah, was plucked from the United Nations compound, in which he had been cowering, and was tortured, castrated, shot, then hanged outside the palace. A similar fate befell his brother. (I was told by a reliable source—the same person had informed me that Osama bin Laden had a kidney complaint a day before the international media picked up the story—that Razzaq had personally ordered these executions.) No Afghan I've met has ever lamented these two men, but the speed of their killing, which was carried out within a couple of hours of the Taliban's arrival, not to mention the absence of judge, jury, and other formalities, occasioned some brief international embarrassment.

"Is it true that the penalty for beardlessness is ten days in jail?" I asked Razzaq.

"Yes, that is true."

"And why not nine or seven days?"

"That is the job of the Department of Religion. Only security is our job."

"Why is a burka better than a chador?" I asked.

"A burka covers all, so it is the real thing for women."

Razzaq became glum at this mention of the Taliban's treatment of women, much as he did when I later raised the question of Osama bin Laden, and we moved briefly to other subjects. "Sir, do you have any special message for the Americans?"

"We fought against Russia for years, and the Americans helped us," Razzaq said. "And we ask them and their government to help us again. As Afghanistan is destroyed, we expect help in reconstruction, and facilities for widows and orphans."

The matter of widows and orphans had particularly weighed on me. I felt that the Taliban government had no Islamic justification in its treatment of them. Since Razzaq had brought the subject back around to women again, I asked him, "Who is helping those widows now?"

"The Minister of Religion has promised some programs. And also the N.G.O.s"—nongovernmental organizations, or charities—"have done something."

"Does Islam permit widows with no other resources to go out and beg?"

"We are trying our best to prohibit them from this, and we are trying to give them facilities."

"But if they have no such facilities, if they are hungry, is it permitted?"

"It is still prohibited."

A GLANCE FROM ACROSS THE DIVIDE

The Minister's answer gave the Taliban a pitiless public face indeed, scorning the needs of the literally faceless. In truth, though, this regulation did not seem to be enforced. The beggar women plied their trade quite openly, even when Taliban passed by.

Afghans are no less pragmatic than other people, and continued exposure over the years to the realities of government and society seemed to be helping these Taliban children of war to mature. Year by year, even in Kabul, the theocracy was growing more moderate. As the brave girl had told me, the behavior of the Taliban has been "affected by humans."

When the Taliban first came to Jalalabad, in September, 1996, they searched house to house, for televisions, videocassettes, and other irreligious items. They used the confiscated televisions for target practice. They required stores to remove labels from shampoo bottles wherever a human face was shown. But this February a retired professor there told me that the searchers had quickly tired of their unpopular investigations. Originally, he said, they'd believed that all urban dwellers were corrupt, but now they'd begun to realize that most citizens were not so bad; or perhaps some of the Taliban were growing corrupt themselves. (The Talib who worked the reception desk of my guesthouse in Jalalabad kept hitting me up for film in a most un-Islamic manner.) The professor watched television every day now—an activity that, in 1996, would have meant a fifteen-day jail sentence. Now the Taliban would not bother to come to his home unless someone proffered eyewitness testimony against him, and even in such a case they would merely confiscate his television—and possibly keep it for themselves, he said, laughing. He felt safe, and pleased to have the Taliban in power. They didn't care anymore if women went out alone, he told me. (I myself had verified this: when I visited the Talib dignitary from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, he had tried to persuade me that women didn't have it so bad in Afghanistan. At one point, he and his three friends had called out excitedly for me to come and look at the street. "Look, look! Do you see? A lady, and her face is not covered, and no one is caring!")

In Kabul, I discovered in store windows one or two soap labels that bore the likenesses of women. And there was even a photograph of people (with no faces showing) mounted on the door of a taxi. Outside the cities, my taxi-drivers always listened to music, lowering the volume when they approached Taliban checkpoints, but not troubling to turn the radio off. In Pakistan, I'd met a doctor who had emigrated when the Taliban banned the possession of anatomical diagrams. But a doctor who'd stayed told me that things were not so bad now. "Before, we saw them beating women in the street. Now for a long time I don't see these beatings anymore. And now we have a camera in my operating room, and even projectors. I'll tell you a story. One Talib brought his wife to me. I refused to treat her without a letter of authorization, because that is what they make everybody else do. So he brought his wife to Pakistan. And I think he started to wonder about this policy."

One United Nations official, speaking of the Afghans, told me, "What they need is more outsiders, more exchange of ideas." Thanks to the United Nations, that is precisely what they aren't getting. The sanctions have begun their strangling work. Gasoline and wheat are smuggled in from Pakistan (and duty-free appliances and cars are smuggled from Dubai through Afghanistan and out to Pakistan), but the price of bread is rising in Kabul, and hungry families blame the Americans. An Afghan rug merchant told me, "First you created one Osama. Now you are creating many, many Osamas."

Americans worry that Afghanistan has become a petri dish in which the germs of Islamic fanaticism are replicating—soon Afghans will be hijacking American planes and bombing embassies everywhere. And their fears are not necessarily unfounded. The Taliban are unemployed war veterans, ready and even eager to return to the battlefield. "In the nineteenth century, we beat the British more than once," Afghans often told me. "In the twentieth century, we beat the Russians. In the twenty-first, if we have to, we'll beat the Americans!" Sarwar Hussaini, the director of a Peshawar-based human-rights organization called the Coöperation Centre for Afghanistan, told me that Afghanistan was full of terrorist-training camps, that Pakistanis, Chechens, Uzbeks, and Arabs were there, learning to fight for Islamic supremacy in their own countries.

But is Afghanistan the puppet-master or the puppet? Masoud is said to receive money from Russia and Iran. Pakistan, a patron of all seven factions during the jihad, is now closely allied with the Taliban. The Iranians have financed some Hazara groups in Afghanistan. China is also dabbling, for fear of Muslim power invading its own territory. And Saudi Arabia has broken off diplomatic relations with the Taliban, and therefore is suspected of aiding either Masoud or Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, another former mujahid. The Afghans themselves blame neighbors and superpowers for everything that has befallen them.

The Taliban could have come to power in any war-torn Islamic country. They gained supremacy in Afghanistan because all other leaders and movements there had discredited themselves through selfishness, vanguardism, gangsterism, and, above all, factionalism. Barring further mischief on the part of the superpowers, the Taliban may defeat Masoud and win their civil war. And it's entirely possible that as rulers they are preferable to any of the competition.

"I think Afghan people should choose neither Taliban nor Masoud," Hussaini told me. "Masoud is not a good alternative—he's proved that by his corruption. And the Taliban are not the kind of people one should like." But whom should the Afghans choose instead? A few old-timers long for the King to come back, but most people just say flatly that no good leader exists. Should the Taliban fall apart, it seems likely that the political and educational vacuum in Afghanistan will remain.

In Kabul, I stood in a grimy, unheated bookstore, some of whose books had been Islamicized, the faces on the jackets blacked out with splotches of Magic Marker. The bookstore seemed to have been subjected to this process randomly, though, as if the morality police had got tired or wandered off to look for something to eat. In the corner stood a rack of postcards from before the war, the faces depicted on them untouched. Dusty travel posters of "exotic" tribesmen remained on the wall.

As I talked to the bookseller, three Talibs entered the store, with black turbans wrapped around their faces like coiled cobras. Slowly, with wide eyes, whispering each word, they began to sound out the titles of the books. Soon, another joined them, whether searching for vice or merely passing the time I didn't know, and neither did the bookseller, who hung his head in breathless silence. They were looking for something—they seemed suspicious and disapproving—but perhaps they doubted their ability to find what they sought. Or maybe they were just cold. We could all see our breath condensing.

With the frightened bookseller translating, I asked one of them to tell me his happiest and saddest memories, and he said, "In my twenty-eight years of life, there's been nothing but war. Of course I have never been happy."

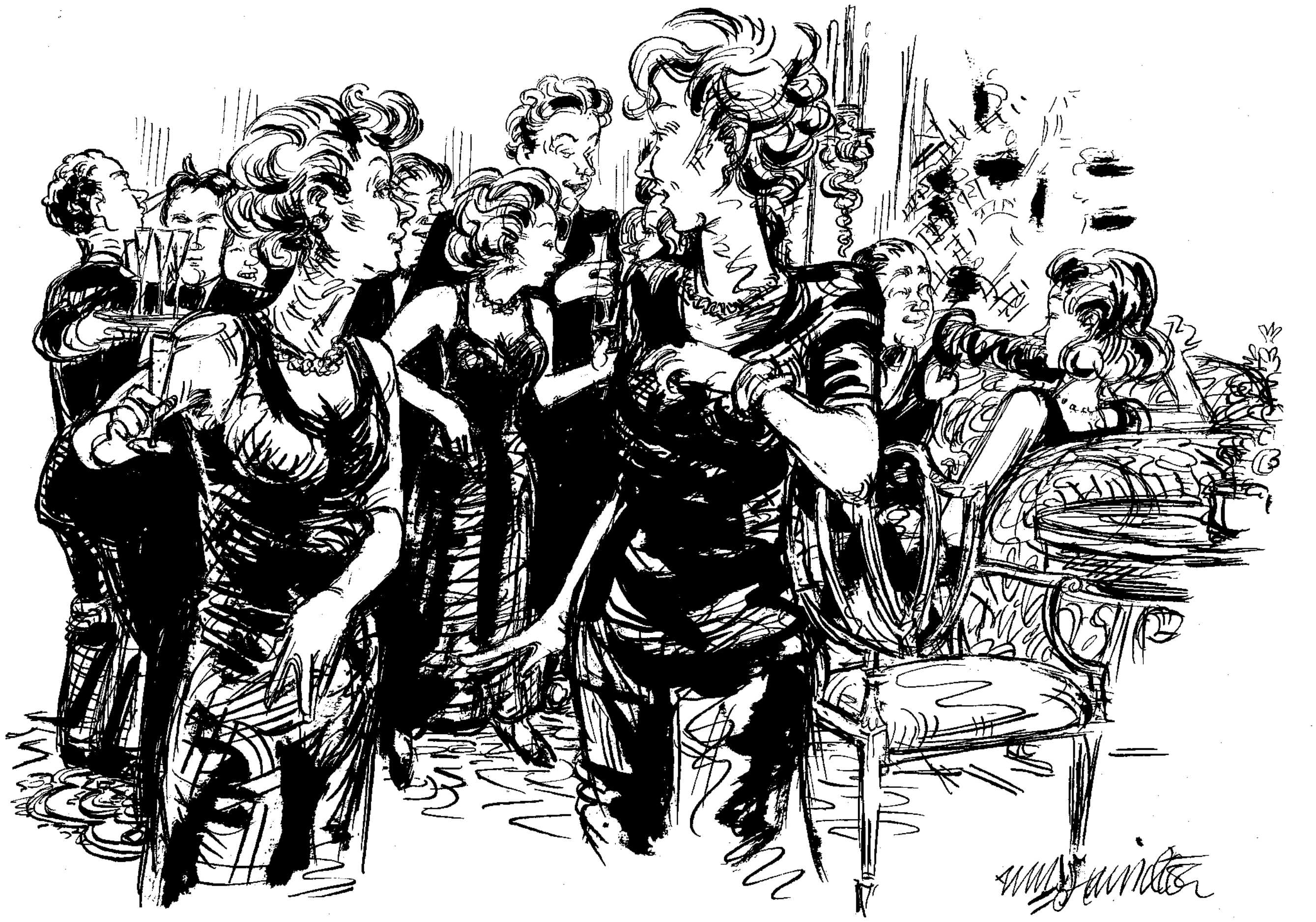
"Not even when you took Kabul?"

"That one day," he conceded without interest.

The Taliban asked me where I was from, and when I told them they fixed me with looks of rage.

"Tell the Americans that we believe their government is responsible for all our problems, and that they must stop this terrorism against us," the leader said curtly.

But they meant well. What they really wanted to do was to invite me into Islam. I showed them my Koran, and, as all their comrades had, they took it eagerly into their hands, kissed it, and slowly and silently began reading from it, their lips moving in a rapture. They promised me that if I became a Muslim they would take care of me forever. They'd feed and shelter me for the rest of my life. They'd find a special teacher for me. I'd become their brother. They gazed at me from across the divide, waiting. ♦



"She's all surgery and he's all pharmacy."

PROFILES

HER SECRET IDENTITIES

Cindy Sherman's art is as mysterious as ever. So is Cindy Sherman.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

People are often amazed that someone as "nice" as Cindy Sherman could be a major artist. By nice, I mean friendly, modest, warm, considerate, and even-tempered—qualities that we do not usually associate with artistic ego, and which might seem antithetical to the disturbing and phenomenally influential work that this artist has produced over the last twenty-three years. Since the early nineteen-eighties, when her now famous series of "Untitled Film Stills" caught the art world's attention, Sherman's photography-based art has presented us with deformed, disfigured, or demented people; still-lifes of spilled food and vomit; wicked parodies of Old Master paintings; grotesque, part-human monsters; medical mannequins arranged in pornographic poses; and, more recently, hideously distorted masks and mutilated dolls. These and other manifestations of Sherman's singular talent have brought her virtually universal praise. Her name figured prominently on most end-of-the-millennium lists of the century's leading artists. (*ARTnews* placed her, along with Jasper Johns and Bruce Naumann, among the top ten now living.) One of the "Untitled Film Stills," which originally sold for fifty dollars apiece, brought two hundred thousand five hundred dollars at Christie's last spring, and the photographs in her current show, which opened at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles in March, were all sold before the opening, at thirty thousand dollars each. None of this seems to have left a dent in Sherman's unassuming, unpretentious personality, or kept her from being the nicest girl on any block.

All right, she's forty-six, well past girlhood, but the fact is that both men and women tend to see her this way. "Cindy is such a girl," her old friend Brooke Alderson said recently. "When we talk, it's usually about something like finding the right lipstick at K mart." A more recent acquaintance, Paul Hasegawa-Overacker, who has been interviewing Sherman for his public-access TV show "galleryBeat," sees her as "a girl, like grrr-l." He says, "She doesn't have an 'attitude.' But I don't know anybody who kicks ass the way Cindy does in her art." When I asked Sherman about the violent images in her most recent New York show—the scarred and mutilated dolls—she agreed that they were pretty violent, and went on to say that, "as everybody knows," she had recently gone through a painful divorce, and there was probably some anger being acted out in them. Nobody ever sees that anger acted out anywhere else. She could be a poster girl for T. S. Eliot's dictum that the more perfect the artist, the greater the separation between the individual who suffers and the mind that creates.

Sherman was married for nearly fifteen years to the French-born video artist Michel Auder, who is ten years older than she is but not nearly as well known. She dealt with the strains that her growing fame placed on their marriage by shunning the spotlight, so rigorously that her New York dealers (and friends) Helene Winer and Janelle Reiring, whose gallery, Metro Pictures, has represented her since the start of her career, assumed that she took no pleasure in the trappings of her success. "I really had thought she didn't enjoy it, and that she chose to lead this incredibly quiet life away from the art world," Reiring told me. "But it wasn't that at all. It's amazing how she's been able to change her life around." She goes out more, to dinners and art-world openings. She's found a house in Sag Harbor to supplement her SoHo loft. She keeps in shape by kickboxing at a gym twice a week, and she has even been linked romantically, if briefly, with Steve Martin, who escorted her to the Venice Biennale last May and to the opening of the "Sensation" show last October. Experiencing celebrity on Martin's level was "a little scary" to Sherman, who is rarely recognized in public. They have remained friends, and Martin was the co-host (with Larry Gagosian) of a dinner for her at Mr. Chow's, in Beverly Hills, after her opening.

For the Gagosian show, Sherman reverted to a device she had often used in the past: taking her own face and body as jumping-off points for large-scale photographs of fictional characters. There were twelve of them this time, and in Sherman's mind they were all Hollywood types, women who had some connection, however peripheral, with the film industry. A big, busty, too blond number in a white dress, sporting an extreme (obviously fake) diamond ring and turquoise eyeshadow, put me in mind of Linda Tripp until Sherman described her to me as "some collector's wife, maybe, or a mogul's wife." (First wife, that is.) Another, even more heavily made-up creature, with glitter in her flyaway blond wig, was "an ex-bit player, who's still thinking about the Hollywood life style." There were former Valley Girls who had spent too much time in the sun; a New Age guru with long silver-blue fingernails, Indian beads, and a serene half smile; and a tattooed "biker chick," as Cindy referred to her, who had "started out looking closer to Cher, but then I sort of roughened her around the edges." It was a little odd, walking around the empty gallery with the artist—this was the day before the opening, when the show had just been installed—looking at portraits for which she had posed but in which she was not present. Sherman herself is slim, casual, and unaggressive. Her hair these days is short and blond. (It changes color periodically.) Her makeup is minimal. At the gallery that morning, she had on jeans and a red-and-white T-shirt, but she informed me that she had bought a dark-blue Prada dress for the opening, and had just had her nails done at Frédéric Fekkai, courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery. Her rental car was a red Jaguar—Hertz was offering a special on it, she said, giggling. In her relaxed, low-key way, Sherman

SABA

Sherman is great fun to be around. The same can't be said of the women in her new pictures. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

UNITE OR DIE
H.Q.
D. Reilly

"This is your day, Ma. Let me carry your ammo."

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is great fun to be around. This is not something that could be said of the women whose pictures lined the walls.

At the opening the next night, which was hugely crowded, a woman in a fur stole asked me what I thought of the pictures. I mumbled something, which neither of us could hear above the din. "I've been looking at her work for a long time," the woman said, in a firm and measured tone, "and these are the most disturbing things I've seen yet. There is no empathy in them, none at all. Every woman I've talked to here feels the same way." I asked if she meant that the pictures were cruel, and she said yes, emphatically. I could see her point. Several of Sherman's Hollywood types projected a kind of desperation that went beyond parody. They weren't losers, exactly, but you couldn't help seeing how hard they worked to hang on to things—youth, glamour, hope. Although the women might appear shallow, with their silicone implants and their gaudy makeup, their stories ran deep, and this, of course, is what has made Sherman's work so powerful and so influential. She reclaimed the oldest trick in the book, storytelling, and gave it new life in visual art. An amazing number of younger artists have followed her lead; the galleries are full of what has come to be called setup photography, in which complex and often highly enigmatic scenarios are plotted, constructed, and photographed, and much of the newer painting and sculpture on view these days has a strong narrative content. Nobody's stories, however, are more gripping than Sherman's, or more merciless. Although her Hollywood portraits didn't strike me as cruel, I had the sense, whenever I glimpsed one of their real-life counterparts circulating in the opening-night crowd, that to some people they could be very upsetting.

At the dinner immediately following, in Mr. Chow's dynastic, Art Deco palace, I never even saw Sherman. She had disappeared in the cloud of stars and potentates: Robin Williams, Jacqueline Bisset, David Hockney, LL Cool J, Chloë Sevigny, Cheryl Tiegs, Ahmet Ertegun, Eli Broad, Mike Leigh, Elle Macpherson, among many others. Several people I talked with, including Steve Martin, thought it was interesting that Sherman had come full circle, so to speak, with photographs that had to do, in one way or another, with the movie business. Sherman herself once talked to an interviewer about the stereotype of a girl who dreams all her life of being a movie star, and either succeeds or fails. "I was more interested in the types of characters that fail," she had said. And now here she was, a star in her own right, celebrated yet virtually anonymous. Dinner guests who didn't know her kept asking which one was Cindy.

She left town two days later, a few hours before the Academy Awards ceremony. "I was just as happy not to go to that," she told me. "It would have seemed a little pretentious—and I was pretty stressed out from the opening."

Growing up in suburban Long Island, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, Cindy Sherman watched a lot of movies on television. "Million Dollar Movie" played the same film five nights running, and she'd watch all five showings. She watched horror films, and classics, and occasionally an art film on PBS; she vividly remembers seeing Chris Marker's "La Jetée," a post-nuclear-holocaust story done almost entirely in still images and voice-over. Cindy was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, but when she was three her family moved to Huntington Beach, Long Island, where her father worked as an engineer for Grumman Aircraft and her mother taught in the public schools. She had what she remembers as a normal, happy childhood. "The summers were great," she told me. "We could just take a towel and walk to the beach, ten minutes away down a wind-ey little road." Cindy—her given name was Cynthia, but nobody called her that—was the youngest of five children, two of whom had grown up and moved out by the time she came along. (She was nineteen years younger than Bob, the eldest.) Her brothers and her sister remember that Cindy spent a lot of time alone in her room, and that she loved to play dress-up. She had a trunk full of old clothes, some of them inherited from her grandmother, with which she could transform herself into a little old lady or a witch or a monster; she never seemed to want to be a ballerina or a glamour girl. Cindy didn't have a problem with the way she looked out of costume; it was just that she really enjoyed becoming someone else. Because she was the baby of the family, she was probably spared some of the difficulties that the others had gone through with Charles Sherman, their father, whom they all seem to have disliked in varying degrees. Cindy once described her father to Peter Schjeldahl as a "creep," an insensitive and self-absorbed man who “would criticize with hate.” Their mother, she added, “was always shielding him from the world and us from him.” Cindy’s brothers and sister went on to have families and productive lives, all except Frank, who committed suicide when he was twenty-seven. Frank, who never settled on a career, had moved back into his parents’ house while Cindy was still in school, and during the last year of his life the two of them were very close.

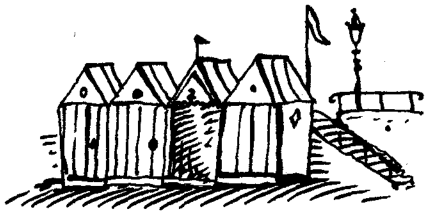
Another thing her siblings remember is that Cindy was always drawing. Even when she watched TV, she would be working on a school art project or making skillful likenesses of people or objects. She got her best grades in art, and, since her family couldn’t afford private-college tuition, she chose the State University College at Buffalo, whose art department offered a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

Sherman entered college in the fall of 1972. She did very well in drawing and painting—she could copy anything with great precision—but the basic B.F.A. curriculum required her to take a photography course, and she flunked that, not having mastered the technical aspects. Obliged to take the course again as a sophomore, she had a different instructor, a young woman named Barbara Jo Revelle, one of the few teachers there who were aware of conceptual art and other contemporary trends. “She felt that to have an idea was what mattered,” Sherman recalls, “and right away that made so much more sense to me.” Sherman had recently met Robert Longo, a charismatic older student who knew a lot about modern and contemporary art. On one of their first dates, he took her to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, a first-rate museum right across the street from the college, which she had never thought to visit on her own.

In the spring of her sophomore year, Sherman was living off campus with Longo, and worrying herself silly about her photography class’s upcoming field trip. “Barbara Jo’s class had a history of going out every spring to a local waterfall—not Niagara, just some idyllic spot—to get naked and take pictures,” she said. “Me being the prude I was, and still am, I dreaded that so much! So I decided to confront the idea. I took a picture of myself just standing in a room of the apartment I shared with Robert, stark naked, like a deer in the headlights. After that, I did more pictures using my body, distorting it by weird angles. I guess that was the beginning of using myself.” She passed the course this time, and soon afterward decided to change her major from painting to photography. Her adviser said she didn’t seem very committed to either, and had her switched from a B.F.A.- to a regular B.A.-degree program.

Robert Longo graduated from Buffalo State in 1974, but he stayed on and, with his friend Charles Clough, started Hallwalls, a nonprofit exhibition space in a former Buffalo ice-making plant. (It was modelled on Artists Space in New York, and other “alternative” galleries that were springing up in the early seventies.) Longo and Clough wangled grant funds to renovate the premises, and they invited artists whose work they admired to come and lecture or lead workshops; in the first year, visitors included Robert Irwin, Jonathan Borofsky, Vito Acconci, and Chris Burden. As Longo’s girlfriend, Sherman struck Clough and the other artists and students who hung out at Hallwalls as a quiet, background presence but a presence nonetheless. Now and then, for exhibition openings or parties, she would turn up as someone else—Lucille Ball, on one memorable occasion, or a pregnant housewife, decked out in one of the clunky outfits she was always picking up at local thrift shops. She never tried to act out the character she had become, or to call attention to herself; it was just the same quiet Cindy, playing dress-up. Eventually, encouraged by Longo, she began to photograph some of these people she could turn herself into. Linda Cathcart, a newly appointed curator at the Albright-Knox, put a fold-out book of her photographs—a series of head shots in which she transformed herself using makeup—in a regional group show there in 1975, along with work by Longo, Clough, and other Hallwalls artists. “The more Cindy’s work accessed Cindy, the more it grew,” Longo recalls. “Cindy’s work was growing a lot faster than mine.”

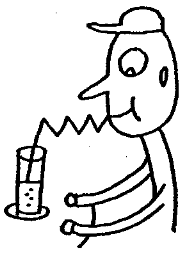
Sherman graduated that year and would have been happy to stay in Buffalo indefinitely, even though most of her artist friends said she should be in New York. The city scared her—as a kid, growing up less than an hour away, she almost never went there. Then, in 1977, she won a three-thousand-dollar grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Longo had just been selected as one of five artists in an important show at Artists Space, and he decided it was time they made the break. “I’ve got the show,” he said, “and you’ve got the money.”



They moved that summer, subletting a loft on Fulton Street from the artist Troy Brauntuch. “Cindy had a real hard time for the first few months,” Longo recalls. “She’d get dressed and put on her makeup, and then never leave the apartment.” She was hired for an entry-level buyer’s job at Macy’s, but she quit after one day. Helene Winer came to the rescue at that point, by making her the receptionist at Artists Space. As the director there, Winer had visited Hallwalls, met Longo and Sherman and the others, and shown their work in New York. “I wanted Artists Space to be a place where artists felt comfortable, and right from the start everybody adored Cindy,” she told me. Sherman worked there from 1977 to 1981. And there, too, she occasionally came to work as someone else—a nurse in a white uniform, a fifties secretary-type—and everyone found that weird and funny, but she stopped doing it because, she said, she was afraid of losing her street identity, “which you really need in New York.” One day in 1978, she brought in some eight-by-ten black-and-white photographs. It was the first work she had been able to do since leaving Buffalo, and it struck Winer and others as original and very exciting.

“Untitled Film Still #7” (1978). A young woman in a white slip and white stockings stands in the open doorway of a cheap motel. She faces us directly, bending forward at the waist, holding a full Martini glass by the rim as, with her left arm, she pushes back the curtains. Oversized dark glasses shield her eyes from the harsh sunlight raking one bare shoulder. Another woman (Sherman’s friend Nancy Dwyer) sits in the sun to the left of the door, her face hidden by a straw hat. Vegas showgirls getting it together after a hard night? A scene from an early Hitchcock film, which we can almost, but not quite, place? Like real film stills, which are not frames from a movie but working photographs, designed to tout a product on billboards or in ads, Sherman's tell stories that viewers can read in different ways. "I wanted them to seem cheap and trashy, something you'd find in a novelty store and buy for a quarter," she told me. "I didn't want them to look like art."

There are sixty-nine in all, sixty-nine single-image dramas in which Sherman plays all the roles: primly dressed office worker, small-town librarian, jilted lover, bimbo, film-noir heroine, suburban high schooler, angry housewife (scowling over a broken bag of groceries). The sheer range of self-transformation is astonishing. Using only makeup, wigs, clothing, and a few props, she makes herself look vulnerable, sexy, gauche, put-together, a total mess, plump, slender, tough, childlike, worn—every kind of woman except Cindy Sherman. You could study the pictures for an hour and then fail to recognize her on the street. Some of the characters are loosely based on actresses in specific films (Sophia Loren in "Two Women"; Monica Vitti in "L'Avventura"), but the details are made up, and viewers who tell Sherman they "remember" the scene that is being re-created are remembering wrong. One reason the pictures are so compelling is that Sherman never seems to be acting in them—she projects the character through subtle, understated relationships between her expression, her clothes, the background, the lighting, and a general atmosphere unique to each image. She took many of them herself, using an extended shutter release; for others, she set up the scene and got Longo or someone else to snap it. Her father, who was retired and living in Arizona, took the most famous one, which shows her as a blond waif in a plaid skirt and white socks, standing with her cheap suitcase on a country road at dusk, waiting for—what? Sherman says she imagined the character waiting for a bus, but the picture's unofficial title, conferred by others, is "The Hitchhiker," which carries a frisson of anxiety about who or what will appear around that darkening curve in the road. Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" are now considered to be one of the landmarks of late-twentieth-century art. Ten prints were made of each image, and most of them have been sold at least once; the Museum of Modern Art has the only complete set, purchased in 1996, for a price believed to be in excess of a million dollars. According to Peter Galassi, the chief curator of MOMA's photography department, they are the work of "a very young artist who, following her own nose, figured out something that worked for her, and that resonated with all kinds of concerns and passions that were outside her."



Her timing was perfect. In the early eighties, after a decade of relative quiescence in contemporary art, new energies were heating up the scene. Neo-expressionism, which emerged more or less simultaneously in Germany, Italy, and New York, unleashed a wave of large-scale, semi-figurative painting and sculpture, along with the operatic egos of Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and other local practitioners. The appropriationists, meanwhile, were undermining the whole concept of artistic originality with deadpan re-creations of older art. Another trend had been identified in a 1977 show at Artists Space called "Pictures"—the show that made Robert Longo decide to move to New York. Longo, Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch, and the other "Pictures" artists all worked with photographs or photo-based imagery that reflected the media-saturated environment they had grown up with—television, movies, advertising, rock music. Although Sherman was not in the show, her "Untitled Film Stills," some of which were displayed at Artists Space in 1978, in the first of a widening gyre of exhibitions which continues to this day, established her firmly within that group, and when Helene Winer and Janelle Reiring (who had worked for the Castelli Gallery) set up Metro Pictures, in 1980, to showcase the media-oriented newcomers, their core artists were Longo, Goldstein, and Sherman. What set Sherman's work off from the others' was its performance element. As a student in Buffalo, she had admired the work of Eleanor Antin and other performance artists, whose one-person scenarios were often documented in photographs or videos. Although Sherman felt no inclination to perform in public, she had found, in the film stills, a way to use her gifts as a unique and endlessly inventive actress.

She spent the next year teaching herself how to work in color, and on a larger scale. In her first solo show, at Metro Pictures in 1980, Sherman presented a new series of female characters, posed against outdoor backgrounds that she had photographed and then projected onto a screen in her studio. Sherman and Longo had broken up a year earlier, quite amicably—they remained and still are close friends—and she was enjoying a new sense of independence. She wanted to work in the studio alone—no more depending on others to snap the shutter—and she learned, through trial and error, how to make photography do what she wanted, which was to create characters and tell stories. She was using the camera, as one critic observed, "for an end result that didn't necessarily have very much to do with the camera."

Her next series, after the rear-screen projections, was the result of a 1981 commission from *Artforum's* editor-in-chief, Ingrid Sischy, who frequently invited artists to do special projects for the magazine. The format—two facing pages—led Sherman to think about the "centerfold" photographs in *Playboy* and other men's magazines. She came up with several large images, two feet high by four feet wide, showing clothed women in supine or semi-supine positions. The pictures never ran. Sherman remembers Sischy being worried that they might be "misunderstood" by militant feminists. As Sischy explained to me, she thought the pictures, appearing first in a magazine, would look "a little too close" to the pinups in men's magazines, and that the irony in Sherman's approach would be unclear. (It was the only time Sischy ever rejected an art work she had commissioned for *Artforum;* three years later, she commissioned and published another Sherman photograph, and she has been a strong advocate of the work ever since.) At any rate, Sherman wanted to continue with the horizontal format, and she went on to make a series of "Centerfold" photographs that caused a stir when Metro Pictures showed them, later in 1981. With their highly sophisticated color, life-size figures, and a sense of incipient drama, her new prints had the power and authority of oil paintings.

They *were,* moreover, misunderstood by a number of politically minded art students (male and female), who accused Sherman of undermining the feminist cause by depicting females in "vulnerable" poses.

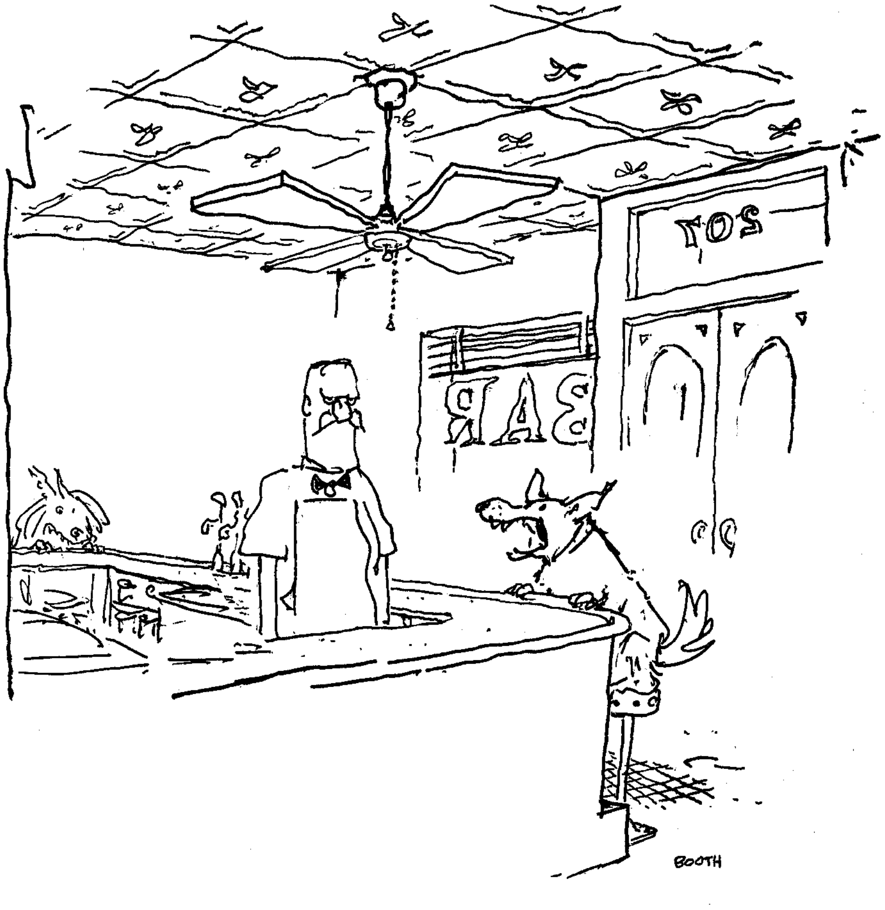
"I was definitely trying to provoke in those pictures," Sherman told me one day as we were leafing through a catalogue of her work. "But it was more about provoking men into reassessing their assumptions when they look at pictures of women. I was thinking about vulnerability in a way that would make a male viewer feel uncomfortable—like seeing your daughter in a vulnerable state. But the horizontal format was a problem. Filling that space meant using some kind of prone figure, and that made it seem to some people that I was glorifying victims, or something. This one in particular"—she stopped at an image of a girl lying in bed, black sheet pulled up to her chin, her damp features and tangled blond hair inundated by harsh daylight. "My idea when I shot it was that this is someone with a hangover, waking up to the sun and thinking, Oh, God, what time did I go to bed? It wasn't anything at all about rape, although that's how it's been described. I realized later on that I have to accept that there will be this range of interpretations that I can't control, and don't want to control, because that's what makes it interesting to me. But at the time I was sort of disturbed that people could so misinterpret my intentions, and I guess that's why I tried to clarify them in the next series."

The so-called "Pink Robes," which came next, are four vertical images of a young woman (Sherman, of course, in nothing but a pink chenille bathrobe) sitting and glaring straight into the lens. Sans wig, sans visible makeup, she still manages, by means of facial expression and lighting, to look nothing like her real self. Sherman envisaged a centerfold model resting between shots, and "pretty annoyed that this is her lot in life." After that, she went on to do vertical portraits of other characters, including some who are either androgynous or male and don't look vulnerable at all.

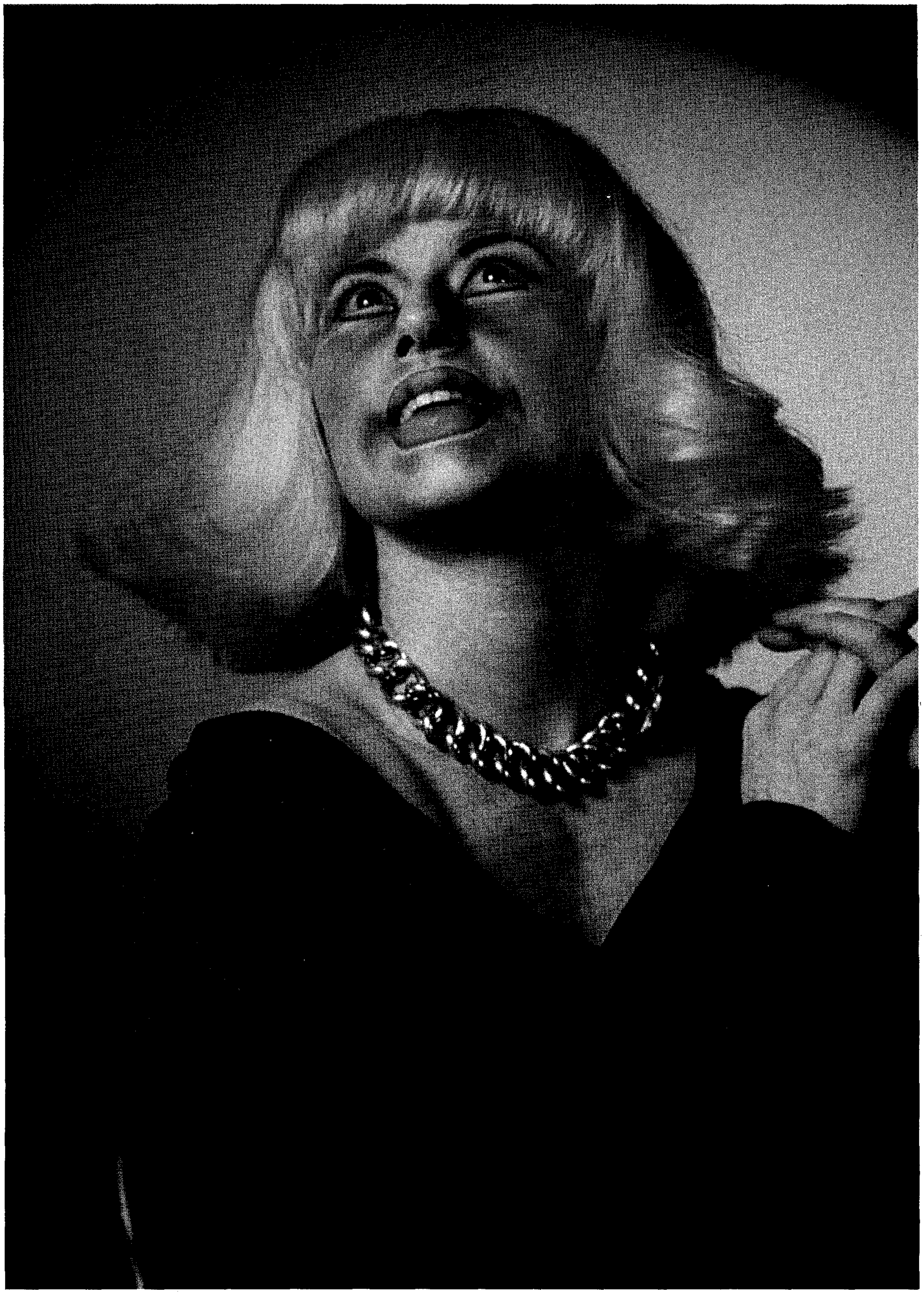
One reason Sherman identifies all her photographs by number, rather than giving them titles, is that she wants whatever is going on in them to remain somewhat ambiguous. This didn't prevent radical feminists from claiming her as their anointed vessel. Scores of articles in academic journals used the "Untitled Film Stills" to illustrate studies of gender, identity, and the dehumanizing male gaze. This was O.K. with Sherman, although she admitted that she never read the articles, and said once that she had never heard of the male gaze. ("It is necessary to fly in the face of Sherman's own expressly non-, even anti-, theoretical stance," one leading feminist concluded.) Sherman shared the feminists' goals, all right, but it wasn't in her nature to be a militant. She was bored by art talk, especially when it bogged down in political issues. Her idea of a good time was to go dancing with friends; the first thing the choreographer Bill T. Jones noticed about her, when they met and became friendly, in the mid-eighties, was that she was a terrific dancer.

Sherman's breakthrough year was 1982. The "Centerfolds" show at Metro Pictures brought invitations for her to exhibit at the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam, and at the important Documenta 7, in Germany. She was in the Whitney Biennial in the spring of 1983, and on the cover of *ARTnews* that September. Success made her uneasy. "I was feeling guilty about being accepted as an artist, especially since some of my friends weren't getting the attention I was," she recalls. (One of those friends was Richard Prince, a Metro Pictures artist whom she lived with for a year or so; they broke up in 1982.) The actor and writer Eric Bogosian, who had become a close friend, remembers a Sherman opening at which he sensed enormous discomfort on her part. "She didn't know what to do with all the attention she was getting," Bogosian said. "And then later she kind of digested that and moved on, went back to being a new form of Cindy the way she always was."

Her reaction to success was to make tougher and more provocative work. Two commissions from fashion designers, for photographs in Sherman's storytelling manner, produced a run of images that progressed from hilarious sendups of the clothes to pictures of ugly women with fake scar tissue and angry



"Make that a double, and give one to the old bitch at the end of the bar."



A character from Sherman's new show, whom she describes as "an ex-bit player, who's still thinking about the Hollywood life style."

or homicidal expressions. The "fairy tales," which came next, featured even more nightmarish scenes: a pig-snouted woman lying in muck; a drowned girl; a turbaned, kneeling houri with huge fake breasts and horribly grinning false teeth. (Many of the props came from Gordon Novelty, a gold mine of tricks and disguises that Sherman had discovered on Broadway.) She worked in sustained bursts of energy, spending long days in the studio until she had completed a series of images, and then making no new pictures for several months, or longer. Her dealers marvelled at her apparent lack of ego. "I don't think her ambition is clear to this day," Helene Winer said last spring. "I know it's there, because it couldn't not be. But she never even knew or cared who the important critics and collectors were. I couldn't think of another artist with comparable innocence or disinterest." There is one slight problem in representing Sherman, according to Janelle Reiring: "It's very hard to get her to say what she wants. She doesn't like to ask for anything."

In truth, Sherman went through a period of feeling quite negative about the overheated eighties art world, with its opportunists, and what she called its "nouveau, flavor-of-the-month collectors," who bought whatever their art consultants told them to buy, and its male art stars, like Julian Schnabel, whose big, macho paintings were selling for as much as ninety thousand dollars at auction in the early eighties, while her photographs, which were issued in editions of ten, brought only a thousand dollars apiece. From the start, Sherman's gallery had presented her as an artist, rather than as a photographer. Some collectors, including Charles Saatchi and Eli Broad, had been quick to recognize this, to see her as a major talent who used the camera for work that was not in essence photographic, but for others it was hard to see beyond her medium. The photography world did not recognize her at all—understandably, since her pictures, though technically sound, had nothing to do with the traditional concerns of documentary or fine-art photographs. When Sherman's pictures first started coming up at auction, in the mid-eighties, they were put into the photography sales, and they did rather poorly; later, Sotheby's and Christie's began putting them in their contemporary-art auctions, where they did very well.

CINDY SHERMAN, "UNTITLED 357" (2000)/COURTESY METRO PICTURES

"Everybody knows Cindy as this incredibly sweet person, but she also has a great edge and anger to her, which comes out in the work," Robert Longo said recently. "At one point in the eighties, I think she got pretty angry about Schnabel and Salle and me, and she made some really nasty work, great work. It was like she was saying, 'Well, fuck you.' " The "Disaster" series, as this work has come to be called, occupied her from 1987 to 1989, and included some amazingly revolting images concocted from fake body parts, spilled and rotting food, and anatomically rearranged dolls. In some of them, for the first time, Sherman herself is not present, or is present only minimally, as in a large-scale closeup of food and vomit, in which her horror-stricken features are reflected in a pair of sunglasses. Seen from a distance, some of these pictures are remarkably beautiful, their details unreadable in the mass of glowing colors and subtly modulated light and shadow. This was intentional. "I wanted something visually offensive but seductive, beautiful, and textural as well, to suck you in and then repulse you," she told one interviewer. She has nothing against beauty. "What I'm against," she explained to me, "is how your mind is fucked with about what you should be, instead of what you are. Most models in fashion magazines are repulsive to me. The few times I've seen models up close, live, they seemed as freakish as someone with a third eye. The tiny head and long, skinny body, and perfectly symmetrical features just looked bizarre." Her increasing fascination with grotesque and ugly images, she said, had "definitely evolved out of the work I was producing," but there was another side to it as well: "The fake blood and false noses and stuff like that were fun for me to use. I saw really interesting things in what other people call ugly. Besides, I find gross things funny." It was the kind of fun she'd had as a child, when she'd make herself look as horrible as possible on Halloween.

Success on a truly embarrassing scale arrived with Sherman's 1989 show of "history portraits," at Metro Pictures. By then, she had pretty much "worked out the guilt," as she put it, and much of the anger as well. After being mostly absent from her photographs for several years, she went back to using herself in this series, costumed in what appear to be the silks and furs and velvets and elaborate hairpieces of Renaissance courtesans and madonnas, Biblical heroines, and haughty, Old World aristocrats, both male and female. The costumes are constructed from thrift-shop remnants, and the grandees are all somewhat off, with false noses or pendulous breasts, but they are also weirdly convincing. (A bejewelled *virgo lactans*, squirting a jet of milk from one of Gordon's trick titties, has the lush physical presence of a Veronese.) Although Sherman worked on this series while she and Michel Auder, whom she had married in 1984, were spending three months in Rome, most of the poses were suggested by reproductions in art books, and very few duplicate actual paintings. When Metro Pictures showed them in 1989, priced from fifteen thousand to twenty-five thousand dollars, in ornate, Old Master frames that Sherman had chosen to set off their bravura scale and sumptuous colors, it was one of those killer art-world events—rave reviews, tremendous word of mouth, every available print sold. Naturally, Sherman felt guilty about that—all the more so because the series had been such fun to do. Anyone who knew her could have predicted that more punishing visions lay ahead.

"Cindy, for God's sake!" Cindy and my wife and I are sitting at a long refectory table in Sherman's SoHo living room, looking at a catalogue reproduction of one of her 1992 "Sex Pictures." This one shows a recumbent figure whose dissociated elements are a granny fright mask and wig, artificial arms bent at the elbow, a fake rubber torso (nude), and a detached groin in which an oversized red sponge-rubber vagina harbors a string of bratwursts. Sherman, as always, is cool and unflustered. She strokes Frieda, her green macaw, who perches on her shoulder throughout the interview, interrupting us now and then with piercing shrieks. (Sherman has had a bird ever since her college days, when someone gave her a dove. Nancy Dwyer, whom Sherman roomed with for a while after breaking up with Robert Longo, recalls being a little unnerved at seeing the dove, which had gone blind, pecking bits of egg from Cindy's lips at the breakfast table.) But the "Sex Pictures"? "I'd been wanting to do some sexually explicit pictures, with real nudity, but I wasn't interested in being nude myself," Sherman explains, in her matter-of-fact way. "And then I found this catalogue you could get, of medical things, to teach medical students about different bodily functions."

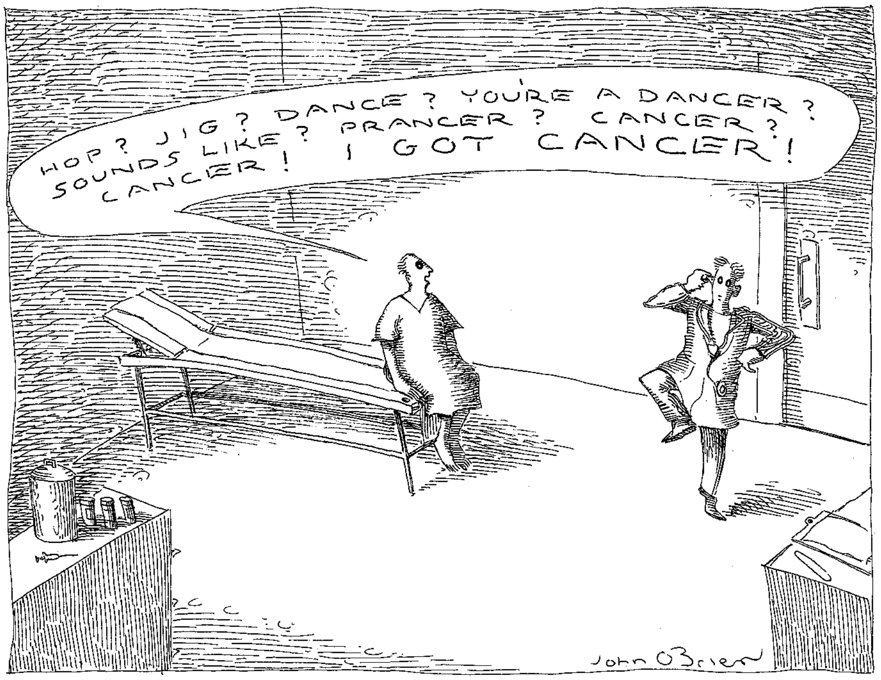
Sherman ordered a number of mannequins from the catalogue, altered and dismembered them, combined them with props from her vast inventory, and photographed them in combinations that make sex look about as appetizing as the bubonic plague. Her sex pictures were in some sense a response to the political storms over "pornography" in art (Jesse Helms versus Robert Mapplethorpe, et al.), and also to Jeff Koons's copulation images, which she had greatly disliked. (She found them puerile and sensationalistic.) The guardians of public virtue never turned a hair over Sherman's images, which have been widely exhibited, and which strike me as far more confrontational than anything produced by Mapplethorpe or Koons. In a gruesome way, they are also extremely funny. The series was not nearly as popular as the history portraits, though, which came as a relief to Sherman.

Honors rained down on her nonetheless: a Whitney Museum retrospective in 1987; a second major retrospective, organized in 1998 by the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Los Angeles, which travelled to six other museums; steadily rising prices; a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant; a Vesuvius of critical articles and catalogues and monographs, so many by now that a graduate student could specialize in Sherman Studies. With each new show, it seemed, Sherman challenged herself and pushed her talent to a new level. She kept surprising the critics, many of whom reacted to her work with helpless admiration. They, and many artists, agreed that she had put photography, for the first time, on the same plane as painting and sculpture. Peter Galassi, who took over as chairman of MOMA's photography department in 1991, is unequivocal in assessing her impact: "The rhetoric of the postmodernist revolution has turned out to be a good deal less persuasive than it first seemed to many people," he said last week, "whereas Sherman's work only seems more and more persuasive."

The more famous Sherman became, the more she withdrew from the art world. She avoided interviews, refused invitations from the David Letterman and the Charlie Rose shows, stopped going to parties and openings. She spent a lot of time at a house that she and Auder had bought in Stephentown, New York, in the Hudson River highlands. She cooked (beautifully, of course); she patronized the local antique shops; she made imaginative Christmas gifts for friends. Auder is an expert skier, so she became one, too. He had a daughter and a stepdaughter from his previous marriage to Viva, Andy Warhol's former superstar. Unable to have a child of her own, Sherman grew very close to her stepdaughters, whom she has continued to see since she and Auder were divorced; they stay in her loft when they come to New York. "I thought about adopting a child," Sherman said once, "but in talking to my husband it seemed like maybe it wasn't a good idea." According to Janelle Reiring, "She was really happy with Michel, and he was great about her success for a long time." In the end, though, her success was too big, and the marriage foundered. "Cindy didn't want it to end," Helene Winer told me. "She went through a lot of therapy. But when she saw it really was over, she wanted it over that day. She's still sad about it, but right now she's the best I've ever seen her."

"If anyone needs me, I'm on my biscotti break in Bryant Park, ogling the shirtless losers."

The new Wes Craven slasher flick, "Scream 3," is playing all over, and I arrange to see it with Sherman. She slides down in her seat like a teen-ager, knees pulled up, and giggles at the gory parts and the in-jokes, like the casting of Roger Corman in a bit part, and afterward she says it isn't anywhere near as scary as Craven's "A Nightmare on Elm Street," which is one of her all-time favorites, along with "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre." She loves the adrenaline rush that she gets from even the worst of these films, and she also believes that they help fortify you for the horrible events that can invade your life at any moment. When the independent producer Christine Vachon came to a Sherman Christmas party in 1994 and said she would love to produce a low-budget horror film directed by Sherman, Sherman was immediately interested. The result, three years later, was "Office Killer," which had a brief run at a few art houses in 1997. (It is currently available on video.) Miramax bought the rights, but sold them to another firm, which never got it into general release. One thing to be said about "Office Killer" is that the film, though written by someone else, could have been made only by Cindy Sherman. The protagonist is a clinically repressed copy editor (played by Carol Kane) who accidentally kills a male colleague, and then, not accidentally, dispatches several others and a couple of children selling Girl Scout cookies, and arranges the corpses in sociable groups in the basement of her house. Laurie Simmons, an artist who is one of Sherman's best friends, says she literally can't watch some scenes in the movie, such as the one where Kane, humming to herself, repairs the rotting chest cavity of her first victim with Scotch Tape. "I've never worked on a movie where I felt the director and I were both creating the character, and that she was as much a part of the character as I was," Kane told me. "She even did my eyebrows every day." As a director, Kane went on to say, Sherman was open to suggestions from everybody on the set. "She was definitely in control, but never needed to show her control. There was a lot of laughing involved, too. The gorier things got, the happier she was." The film received bad reviews, and must be judged Sherman's only non-success to date, but some people loved it. "I could not stop laughing," Ingrid Sischy said. "It was my favorite movie of the year. It should have won an Academy Award." Sherman would like to direct another film sometime, but only if she can write the screenplay.


HOP? JIG? DANCE? YOU'RE A DANCER? SOUNDS LIKE? PRANCER? CANCER? CANCER! I GOT CANCER!
John O'Brien

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Sherman does her work in a long, euphorically cluttered room that adjoins the living room in her loft. Built-in cedar closets and drawers line the walls on two sides, and every one is crammed with props: costumes and fabrics, wigs, fake body parts (one drawer for heads, another for hands), costume jewelry, cosmetics, toys and novelties, masks, fake ants and bugs—twenty years' worth of insatiable collecting. At the far end, in front of a pull-down paper backdrop, is a hard wooden chair flanked by professional tungsten lights, facing a Nikon on a tripod and, just to the right of it, an adjustable, full-length mirror. For the portraits in her Gagosian show, Sherman sat in the chair and developed each of her characters through a thousand small changes of costume, makeup, lighting, and expression. "I'll just sit there and ham it up," as she once explained, "looking in the mirror to see what works." She has no preconceived ideas of what she wants. The character emerges through the process. Sherman has described that process as "trancelike," and it can take a very long time. "When it works, it's really exciting," she once explained. "There is a flash when you see somebody else." When it works, there is a moment when "something else takes over" and the character comes to life, but even then she doesn't know exactly what it's going to look like on film. "My way of working is that I don't know what I'm trying to say until it's almost done."

This is all hearsay, because only Sherman's ex-husband and her cleaning lady have ever seen her at work here. She does everything herself—costumes, makeup, lights, camera, action. A young photographic artist named Susan Jennings works for her two days a week (in a separate office around the corner), doing paperwork and dealing with the outside world, but in twenty years Sherman has never used a studio assistant. Come to think of it, watching her work might be a little creepy. How many of us have actually observed an artist in the act of disappearing into art?

To her friends, there is something mysterious about Sherman. Nancy Dwyer, who has known her since they were students in Buffalo, told me that, even back then, "she had a detachment that made it so she didn't have to engage in showing who she was. Detached but kind. Sometimes you felt as though you weren't getting to know her." Brooke Alderson says she has "the banality of a great actress." Sherman is not nearly as bland as she can appear to be—there is an edge to her opinions, and no one has ever accused her of sentimentality. But she is terribly nice, to everyone ("It's sickening," she concedes), and how do you reconcile that with the anger and the violence and the horrific images that keep cropping up in her work? You don't. With this artist, the work and the life connect in ways that are as surprising to her as they are to us.

At the moment, she is adding to the series of portraits she showed in Los Angeles. The new pictures will not necessarily refer to people there, but they will all come out of Sherman's limitless ability to be someone else. "I'm at a point where when I feel like using myself I will, and when I don't I won't," she said the other day. "As time goes by, and I get older, it'll be interesting to see how I incorporate that into the work." ♦

FICTION

REUNION

BY RICHARD FORD

When I saw Mack Bolger, he was standing beside the bottom of the marble steps that bring travellers and passersby to and from the balcony of the main concourse in Grand Central. It was before Christmas last year, when the weather stayed so warm and watery the spirit seemed to go out of the season.

I was cutting through the terminal, as I often do on my way home from the publishing offices, on Fifty-first. I was, in fact, on my way to meet a new friend at Billy's. It was four o'clock on Friday, and the great station was athrong with citizens on their way somewhere, laden with baggage and precious packages, shouting goodbyes and greetings, flagging their arms, embracing, gripping each other with pleasure. Others, though, simply stood, as Mack Bolger was when I saw him, staring rather vacantly at the crowds, as if whomever he was there to meet for some reason hadn't come. Mack is a tall, handsome, well-put-together man who seems to see everything from a height. He was wearing a long gabardine overcoat of some deep-olive twill—an expensive coat, I thought, an Italian coat. His brown shoes were polished to a high gloss. His trouser cuffs hit them just right. And because he was without a hat he seemed even taller than what he was—perhaps six-three. His hands were in his coat pockets, his smooth chin was slightly elevated, the way a middle-aged man's would be, and as if he thought he was extremely visible there. His hair was thinning a little in front, but it was carefully cut, and he was tanned, which caused his square face and prominent brow to appear heavy, almost artificially so, as though in a peculiar way the man I saw were not Mack Bolger but an effigy situated precisely there to attract my attention.

For a while, a year and a half before, I had been involved with Mack Bolger's wife, Beth Bolger. Oddly enough—only because all events that occur outside New York seem odd and fancifully unreal to New Yorkers—our affair had taken place in the city of St. Louis, that largely overlookable red brick abstraction that is neither West nor Middle West, neither South nor North; the city lost in the middle, as I think of it. I have always found it interesting that it was the home of T. S. Eliot and, only eighty-five years before that, the starting point of Western expansion. It is a place, I suppose, the world can't get away from fast enough.

What went on between Beth Bolger and me is hardly worth the words that would be required to explain it away. At any distance but the close range I saw it from, it was an ordinary adultery—spirited, thrilling, and then, after a brief while, when we had crossed the continent several times and caused as many people as possible unhappiness, embarrassment, and heartache, it became disappointing and ignoble and finally almost disastrous to those same people. Because it is the truth and serves to complicate Mack's unlikable dilemma and to cast him in a more sympathetic light, I will say that at one point he was forced to confront me (and Beth, as well) in a hotel room in St. Louis—a nice, graceful old barn called the Mayfair—with the result that I got banged around in a minor way and sent off into the downtown streets of St. Louis on a warmly humid autumn Sunday afternoon, without the slightest idea of what to do, ending up waiting for hours at the airport for a midnight flight back to New York. Apart from my dignity, I left behind and never saw again a brown silk Hermès scarf with tassels that my mother had given me for Christmas in 1971, a gift she felt was the nicest thing she'd ever seen and perfect for a man just starting life as an editor. I am glad she did not have to know about my losing it, or how it happened.

I also did not see Beth Bolger again, except for one sorrowful and bitter drink we had together in the theatre district last spring, a nervous, uncomfortable meeting we somehow felt obligated to have, and following which I walked away down Forty-seventh Street feeling that all of life was a sorry mess, while Beth went along to see "The Iceman Cometh," which was playing then. We have not seen each other since that leavetaking, and, as I said, to tell more would not be quite worth the words.

But when I saw Mack Bolger standing in the great, crowded, holiday-bedecked concourse of Grand Central, looking rather vacant-headed but clearly himself, so far from the middle of the country, I was taken by a sudden, strange impulse—which was to walk straight across through the eddying currents of travellers and speak to him, just as you might speak to anyone you casually knew and had unexpectedly but not unhappily encountered. And not to impart anything, or to set in motion any particular action (to clarify history, for instance, or make amends), but just to speak and create an event where before there was none. And not an unpleasant event, or a provocative one. Just a dimensionless, unreverberant moment, a contact, unimportant in every other way. Life has few enough of these moments—the rest of it being involved so completely in the predictable and the obligated.

I knew a few things about Mack Bolger, about his life since we'd confronted each other semi-violently in the Mayfair Hotel. Beth had been happy to tell me during our woeful drink at the Espalier Bar in April. Our—Beth's and my—love affair was, of course, only one feature in the long devaluation and decline in her and Mack's marriage. This I'd understood. There were two children; Mack had been frantic to hold matters together for the sake of their futures. Beth was a portrait photographer who worked from home but craved engagement with the wide world outside University City—

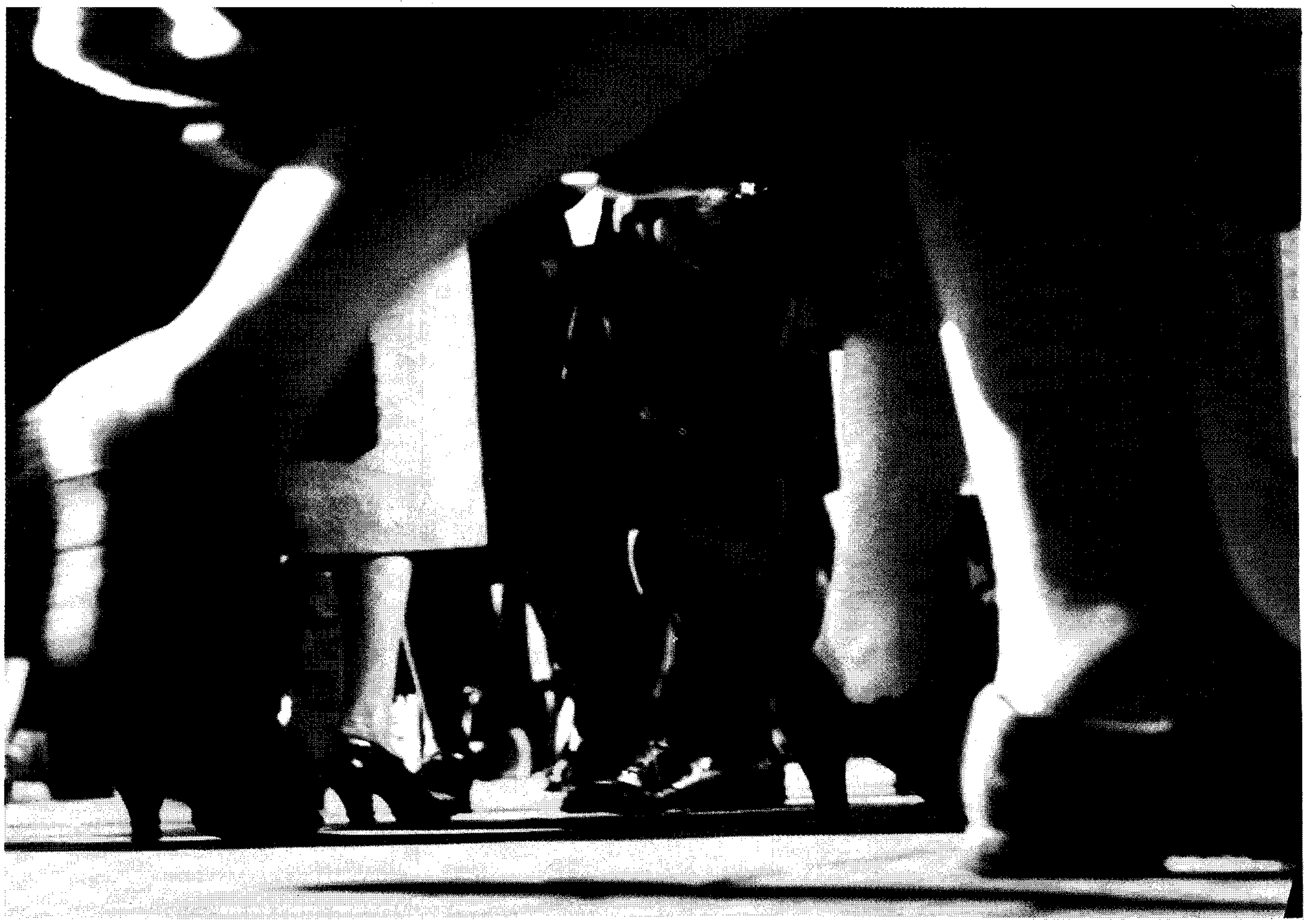
LISETTE MODEL, "RUNNING LEGS" (1940-41), ©1983 LISETTE MODEL FDN., INC./ ELEANOR BAREFOOT GALLERY

craved it in the worst way, and was therefore basically unhappy with everything in her life. After my departure, she moved out of their house, took an apartment near the Gateway Arch, and for a time took a much younger lover. Mack, for his part in their upheaval, eventually quit his job as an executive for a large agribiz company, considered studying for the ministry, considered going on a missionary journey to Senegal or French Guiana; briefly took a young lover himself. One child had been arrested for shoplifting; the other had gotten admitted to Brown. There were months of all-night confrontations, some combative, some loving and revelatory, some derisory from both sides. Until everything that could be said or expressed or threatened was in its time said, expressed, threatened and a standstill was achieved by which they both stayed in their house but kept separate schedules, saw different new friends, had occasional dinners together, went to the Muny Opera, occasionally even slept together, but saw little hope (in Beth's case) of things turning out better than they were at the time of our joyless drink together and the O'Neill play. I'd assumed then that Beth was meeting someone else that evening, had someone in New York she was interested in, and I felt completely fine about it.

"It's really odd," Beth said, stirring her long, almost pure-white finger around the surface of her Kir Royale, staring not at me but at the glass rim where the pink liquid nearly exceeded its vitreous limits but did not, "we were so close." Her eyes rose to me, and she smiled affectionately. "You and I, I mean. Now I feel like I'm telling all this to an old friend. Or to my brother."

Beth is a tall, sallow-faced, big-boned, ash-blond woman who smokes too many cigarettes and whose hair always hangs down in her eyes like a forties Hollywood glamour girl's. This can be attractive, although it also causes her sometimes to seem to be spying on her own conversations.

"Well," I said, "it's all right to feel that way." I smiled back across the little round black-topped café table. It *was* all right. I had gone on. When I looked back on what we'd done, none of it except for what we'd done in bed made me feel good about life, or that the experience had been finally worth it. But I couldn't undo it. I don't believe the past can be repaired that way. It can only be exceeded. "Sometimes," I went on, "friendship's all we're after in the first place." This, I admit, I did not really believe.



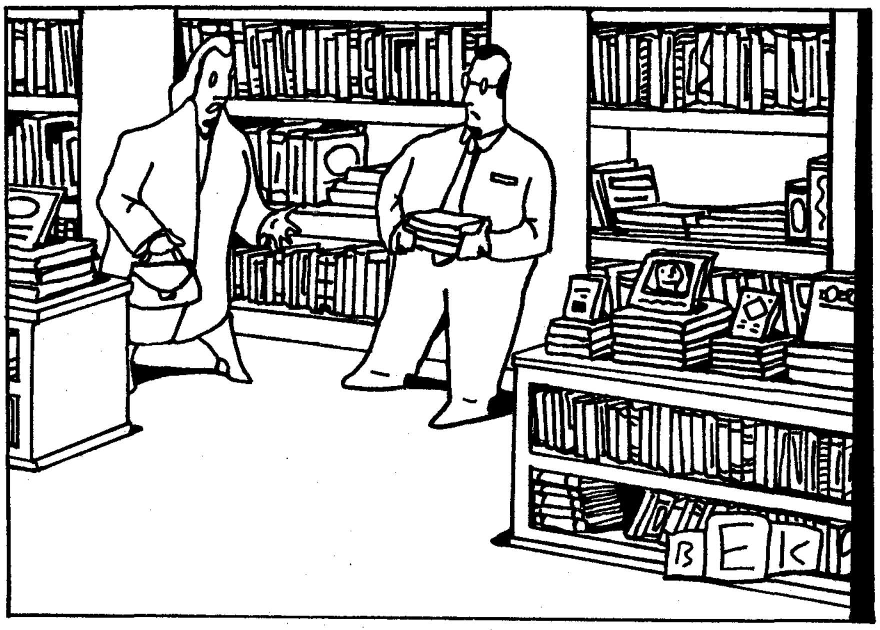
"Mack's like a dog, you know," Beth said and flicked her hair away from her eyes. He was on her mind. "I kick him," she said, "and he tries to bring me things. It's pathetic. He's very interested in Tantric sex now, whatever that is. Do you know what that even is?"

"I don't like hearing this," I said stupidly, though it was true. "It sounds cruel."

"You're just afraid I'll say it about you, Johnny." She smiled and touched her damp fingertip to her lips, which were wonderful lips.

"Afraid?" I said. "Afraid's really not the word, is it?"

"Well, then, whatever the word is." Beth turned her head quickly away and signalled the waiter for the check. She



"Where's your section of books that tell you simple things you already know?"

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did not know how to be disagreed with. It always frightened her.

But that was all. I already said that our meeting was not a satisfying one.

Mack Bolger's pale-gray eyes caught me coming toward him well before I expected them to. We had seen each other only twice. Once at a fancy cocktail party given by an author I had come to St. Louis to wrest a book from. It was the time I had met his wife. And once more, at the Mayfair Hotel, when I'd taken an inept swing at him, and he'd slammed me against a wall and hit me in the face with the back of his hand. Perhaps you don't forget people you knock around. That becomes their place in your life. I, however, find it hard to recognize people when they're not where I believe they belong, and Mack Bolger belonged in St. Louis. But he was an exception.

Mack's eyes fixed on me, then left me, scanned the crowd uncomfortably, then found me again as I approached him. His large, tanned face took on an expression of stony unsurprise, as if he'd known I was somewhere in the terminal and a form of communication had already begun between us. Though, if anything, really, his face looked resigned—resigned to me, resigned to the situations the world foists on you unwilling, resigned to himself. It was what we had in common, though neither of us had a language which could express that. So, as I came into his presence, what I felt was an unexpected sympathy—for him, for having to see me now. And if I could've turned and walked straight away from him I would have.

"I just saw you," I said from the crowd, five feet before I expected to speak. My voice isn't loud, so that the theatrically nasal male voice announcing an arrival from Poughkeepsie on Track 34 seemed possibly to have blotted it out.

"Did you have something special in mind to tell me," Mack Bolger said. His eyes cast out again across the vaulted hall, where Christmas shoppers and overbundled passengers were moving in all directions. It occurred to me—shockingly—that he was waiting for Beth, and that in a moment's time I would be standing there facing her and Mack together, almost as I had in St. Louis. My heart actually struck two profound beats deep in my chest, then seemed for a moment to stop altogether. "How's your face?" Mack said without emotion, still scanning the crowd. "I didn't hurt you too bad, did I?"

"No," I said.

"You've grown a mustache." His eyes did not flicker toward me.

"Yes," I said. I'd forgotten about it, and for some reason felt ashamed, as if I looked absurd.

"Well," Mack said, "good." His voice was the one you would use to speak to someone in line beside you at the post office, someone you would never see again. Though there was also, just barely noticeable, a hint of what we used to call *juiciness* in his speech, some minor undispersable moisture in his cheek that one heard in each of his "s"s and "f"s. It was unfortunate, I thought. It robbed him of a small measure of gravity. I had not noticed it before, in the few overheated moments we'd had to exchange words.

He looked at me again, hands in his expensive Italian coat pockets, a coat that had heavy dark bone buttons and long, wide lapels. Too stylish for him, I thought, for the solid man he was. Mack and I were nearly the same height. But he was in every way larger and seemed to look down to me—something in the way he held his chin up. It was almost the opposite of the way Beth looked at me.

"I live here now," Mack said, without really addressing me. I noticed he had long, dark, almost feminine eyelashes and perfectly sized, perfectly shaped ears, which his new haircut put on nice display. He might've been forty—younger than I am—and looked more than anything like an army officer. A major. I thought of a letter Beth had shown me, written by Mack to her, containing the phrase "I want to kiss you all over. Yes I do. Macklin." Beth had rolled her eyes when she showed it to me. At another time she had talked to Mack on the telephone while we were in bed together naked. On that occasion she'd *kept* rolling her eyes at whatever he was saying—something, I gathered, about various difficulties he was having at work. Once we even engaged in a sexual act while she talked to him. I could hear his little, buzzing, fretful-sounding voice inside the receiver. But that was now erased. Everything Beth and I had done was over. All that remained of it was just this—a series of moments in the great train terminal, moments which, in their own way and in spite of everything, seemed correct, sturdy, almost classical in character, as if this later time were what really mattered, whereas the previous, passionate, linked, but now distant moments were merely preliminary.

"Did you buy a place?" I said to Mack Bolger, and unexpectedly felt a widely spreading vacancy open all around inside of me. It was such a preposterous thing to say.

Mack's eyes moved slowly to me, and his impassive expression, which had seemed to me to signify one thing—resignation—began to signify something different. I knew this because a small cleft appeared in his chin. "Yes," he said and let his eyes stay fixed on me. People were shouldering past us. I could smell some woman's heavy, hot-feeling perfume around my face. Music had commenced in the rotunda, making the moment feel clamorous, suffocating: "We three kings of Orient are . . . " "Yes," Mack Bolger said again, very emphatically, spitting the word from between his straight, white, nearly flawless teeth. He had grown up on a farm in Nebraska, had gone to a small college in Minnesota on a football scholarship, had then taken an M.B.A. at Harvard; had done well. All that life, all that experience was being brought into play now as self-control, dignity. It was strange that someone would call him a dog when he wasn't that at all. He was extremely admirable. "I bought an apartment on the Upper East Side," he said suddenly and blinked his eyes very rapidly. "I moved out in September. I have a new job. I'm living alone. Beth's not here. She's in Paris, where she's miserable—or I hope she is. We're getting a divorce. I'm waiting for my daughter to come down from boarding school. Is that all right? Does that seem all right to you? Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course." Mack was not angry. He was, instead, a thing that anger had no part of or at least had long been absent from, something akin to exhaustion, where the words you say are the only true words you *can* say. Myself, I did not think I'd ever felt that way. Always for me there had been a choice.

"Do you understand me?" Mack Bolger said. His thick athlete's brow slowly furrowed, as if he were studying a creature he didn't entirely understand, an anomaly of some kind, which perhaps I was.

"Yes," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Well, then," he said, and seemed suddenly embarrassed. He looked away, out over the crowd of swarming heads and faces, as if he'd just sensed someone coming. I looked toward where he was looking. No one was approaching us. Not Beth, not a daughter. Not anyone. Perhaps, I thought, it was all a lie. Or perhaps, I thought, for a moment I had lost consciousness, and this was not Mack Bolger at all, and I was dreaming everything. "Do you think there could be someplace else you could go now?" Mack said. His big, tanned, handsome face looked imploring and exhausted. Once Beth had said Mack and I looked alike. But we did not. That had been her fantasy. Without really looking at me again he said, "I would have a hard time introducing you to my daughter. I'm sure you can imagine that."

"Yes," I said. I looked around again, and this time I did see a pretty blond girl standing in the crowd, watching us from several steps away. She was holding a red nylon backpack by its straps. Something was causing her to stay away. Possibly her father had signalled her not to come near us. "Of course," I said. And by speaking I somehow made the girl's face break into a wide smile, a smile I recognized.

"Nothing's happened here," Mack said suddenly to me. He was staring at his daughter. From the pocket of his overcoat he had produced a tiny white box wrapped and tied with a red bow.

"I'm sorry?" I said. I was leaving. People were swirling noisily around us. The music seemed louder. I thought perhaps I'd misunderstood him. "I didn't hear you." I smiled in an entirely involuntary way.

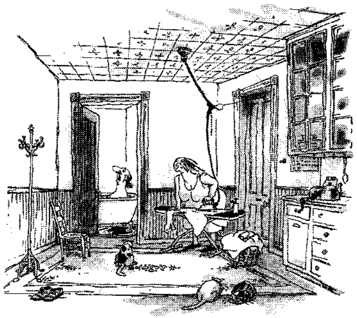
"Nothing's happened today," Mack Bolger said. "Don't go away thinking anything happened here. Between you and me, I mean. *Nothing's* happened. I'm sorry I ever met you, that's all. Sorry I ever had to touch you. You make me feel ashamed." He still had the unfortunate dampness with his "s"s.

"Well," I said. "All right. I can understand."

He simply stepped away from me and began saying something toward the blond girl standing in the crowd smiling. What he said was "Boy, oh boy, do *you* look like a million bucks."

I walked on toward Billy's then, to the new arrangement I'd made that would take me on into the evening. I had been wrong, of course, about the linkage of moments, and about what was preliminary and what was primary. It was a mistake, one I would not make again. None of this was a good thing to have done. Though it is such a large city here, so much larger than, say, St. Louis, I knew I would not see him again. ♦

The Artist.
The Philosophy.
The Funny Business.



"How about supper in the tub tonight, hon?"

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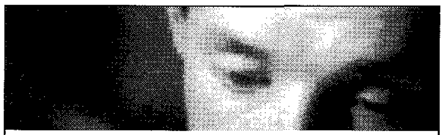

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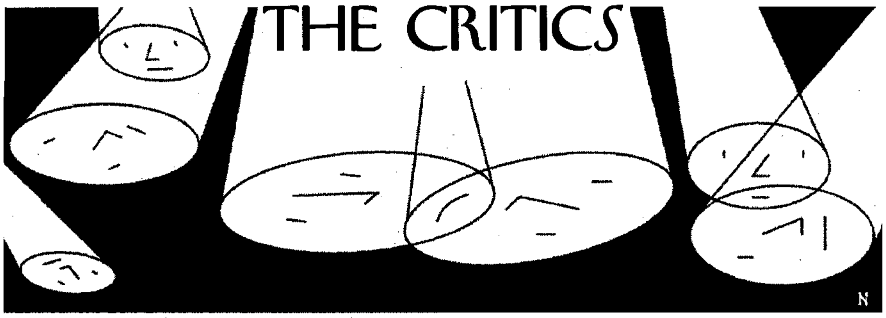


THE CRITICS

THE THEATRE

PAST FORGETTING

My night with Wally and André.

BY JOHN LAHR

Wallace Shawn's "The Designated Mourner" had its sold-out world première in 1996, at the Royal National Theatre, in London. I was there. The cast of three, directed by David Hare, sat on a dais in front of a gold backdrop and fired Shawn's extraordinary words at the audience in a kind of glorified staged reading. Aided by an autocue for what must surely be the longest spoken part in contemporary theatre, Mike Nichols came out of theatrical retirement to give a bravura performance as Jack, the *soi-disant* mourner of a vanished world of literary sophistication and social privilege, of which he claims to be the last standing member. The production was immediately filmed, and Shawn was placed in the weird position of having his play released in America as a movie before it could be seen as a play.

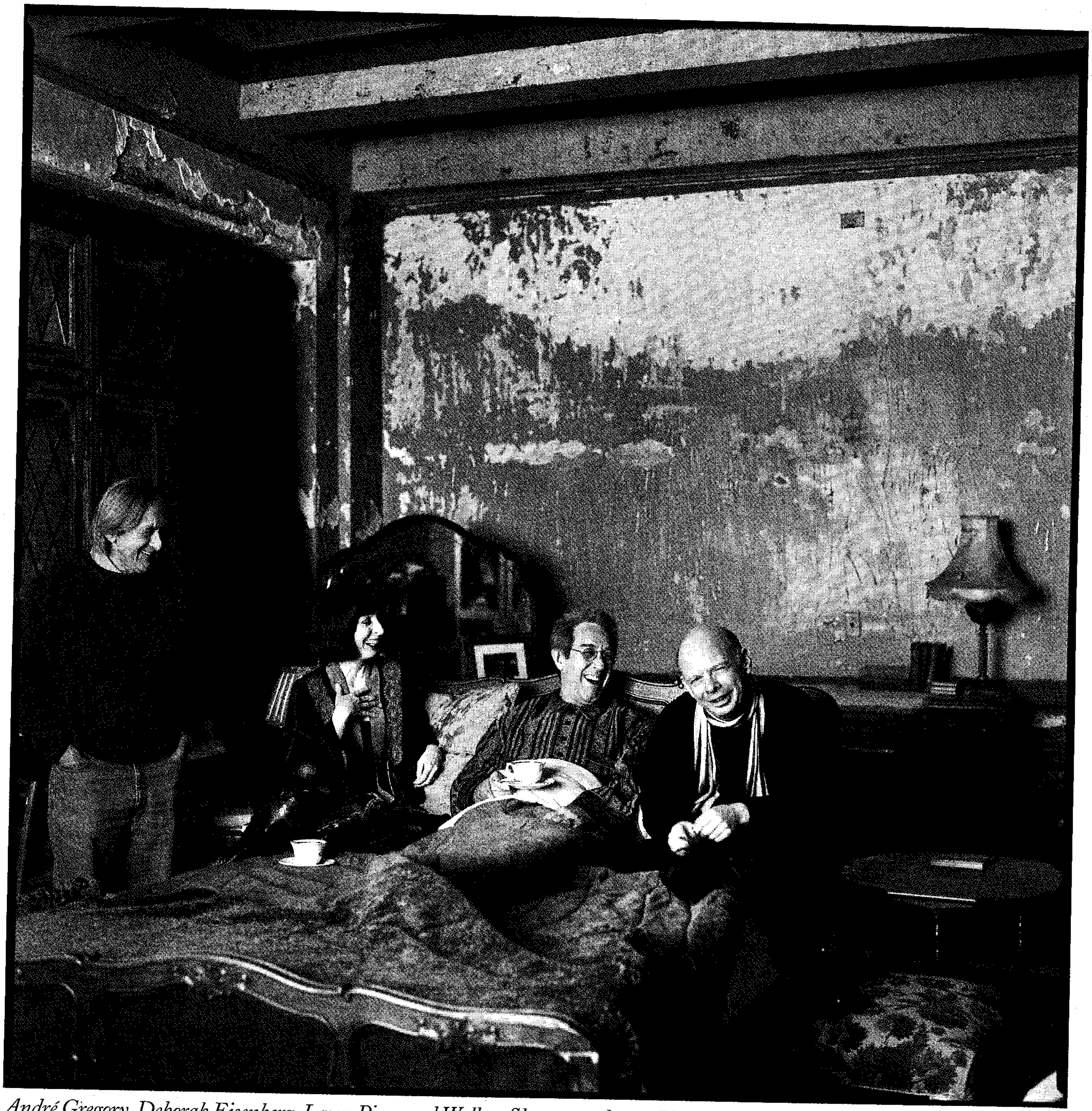
Now, after a sporadic rehearsal period of about nine months over the past two years, Shawn has teamed up with his friend and cohort the director André Gregory to produce a radically different American stage version, in which he himself takes on the main character. Shawn began his acting career in the early seventies, in Gregory's controversial production of "Endgame" (he played a blind violinist), and whenever these two dreamy theatricals emerge from the cocoon of their process it's good news for the American theatre. Their distinguished collaboration has created many fine stage productions and two defining films directed by Louis Malle, "My Dinner with André" and "Vanya on 42nd Street." But "The Designated Mourner" is surely the high-water mark.

The play, which is a short history of abdications in the form of intercut monologues, manages to dramatize a profound cultural and spiritual shift in the land—what Philip Roth recently referred to in these pages as "the narrowing of consciousness." Escape, not exploration, is the culture's new momentum; and in Shawn's apocalyptic tale an uprising of the underclass and a clampdown by the new authoritarian regime depose Jack's élite and, in the process, turn him from an uncomfortable highbrow into a militant lowbrow. (Shawn makes this rebellion sound like Latin-American terrorism, but, after the L.A. riots and the flight of the rich from Beverly Hills, it's not so difficult to imagine it on our own doorstep.) The play begins, it turns out, at the moment when our intellectual history is about to be forgotten, and elegantly flashes back to recount the world that has been lost and the one that has been found.

Ambivalence is Shawn's ozone. In life and onstage, he wrong-foots the world with a cherubic mask of impudence and innocence. He is a daredevil disguised as a schlub, and, from the first beats of this play, he is up to his old dissimulating tricks. As Jack prepares to introduce his father-in-law, Howard, a literary lion he mourns with an almost gleeful hate, he looks us in the eye and says, "I'm serious—honestly—let's forget me and let's talk about someone who actually *is interesting*—let's talk about someone we can all *revere!*" What follows is the longest study of self-absorption since "Hamlet." Irony allows Shawn at once to mock and to mourn, to produce the negative and the positive in virtually the same breath. You never know quite where you are, and this tension is part of the show's captivating charge. Without the comfort of conventional plot or set, the audience is forced back to the words and to its own moral compass. You have to work to understand the play; in fact, you have to work just to *get* to the play.

The cunning rigor of Shawn's text is matched by an equally suggestive and supple theatrical environment. You can't just roll up to this show. It's a kind of treasure hunt—a geographical adventure that turns into an intellectual one. You take the No. 2 or 3 train to Wall Street and head south until you come to an incongruous mock-Tudor walkup—a former men's club—wedged between hulking skyscrapers on South William Street. You follow yellow construction lights up the stairs, pausing on the third floor, where Bruce Odland's strange, sepulchral sounds echo through a dank, chandeliered dining room; then it's a quick ascent up winding marble steps to the fifth floor. There, in a corner amid peeling gray-and-white walls, Eugene Lee and N. Joseph DeTullio have carved out a performance space. The audience sits not on makeshift benches but on solidly comfortable chairs—there are only thirty of them—for which Shawn and Gregory have, at their own expense, provided blankets. It is a chill, dilapidated, crepuscular place, a perfect atmosphere for the moral *froideur* of Shawn's ghost story. Canvas coverings on the bed, chairs, and oak furniture of the set—later pulled off by the actors—lend a haunted feel to the room, and as Shawn paces around it in full view, before the show begins, even he seems a little cold; he sports a rather flamboyant black-and-gold scarf over his turtleneck sweater.

The liberal intellectual empyrean that Jack celebrates and scorns—"the old unbearables," he calls Howard's prestigious crowd—is reminiscent of the world of almost occult power whose smug pedigree Shawn inherited, as the son of William Shawn, the distinguished editor, from 1952 to 1987, of this magazine. Here the playwright is aided by his longtime partner and one of America's finest short-story writers, Deborah Eisenberg,



André Gregory, Deborah Eisenberg, Larry Pine, and Wallace Shawn on the set. Photograph by Brigitte Lacombe.

who brings to the evening a special sense of inbred refinement and arrogance. As Judith, Jack's wife, from whom he eventually becomes estranged, Eisenberg is superb; her chic—the long neck, the tapered fingers, the dark hair with gray highlights, the aquiline nose that sniffs at every vulgarity—evokes a stylish, élite world even before Shawn's words nail it. Judith dotes on her delicate and judicious poet father, who, she tells us, is on a first-name basis with the President. Larry Pine plays Howard with just the right droll note of noblesse oblige. "You know, he *was* lazy," he confides to us about Jack, who, he says, "wasn't actually a bad fellow." "He was so lazy that his favorite foods—I'm not making this up, because I observed it quite carefully—were soup, risotto, mashed potatoes, and ice cream. I'm not exaggerating!"

Jack, of course, is the play's set piece, a tour de force for Shawn, who enjoys surviving in the jungle by playing dead. Within the first few moments of the play, Jack has referred to himself as an "asshole," an "idiot," "boring," "a former student of literature who—who—who went downhill from there." The stammering, the guffaws, the lisping hesitation are all part of Shawn's special music, the endearing jack-o'-lantern grin that hides an ambitious and withering intellect. Jack's vulnerability is so winning that it can make the snidest remark feel almost like a compliment. "It was remarkable simply to make the *choices* he made," he says of Howard. "To dress in blues and greens and not reds or grays; to know about the Sumerians but not about the Assyrians." Shawn's game is subtle and unsettling. The audience needs to sympathize with a character, if only to evade thought, to pigeonhole personality as good or bad, but Shawn won't allow that. Here, as he did in "Aunt Dan and Lemon" (1985), he shows that "a perfectly decent person can turn into a monster perfectly easily." He manipulates his paying customers into liking Jack, only to suck them into the whirlwind of his spiritual free fall. "The Designated Mourner" turns out to be a tale *really* told by an idiot.

When the underclass wreaks its revenge on privilege, in an attack that Jack gleefully refers to as "the disembowelling of the overbowelled," Jack's reaction is not what one would expect. He takes a certain lip-smacking pleasure in the spoiling. In one powerful scene, he spins a globe. "Wretched," "miserable," "unfortunate," "desperate," "powerless," "poor," he says, pointing his stubby finger over all the hemispheres. "God bless them, they're people who simply don't have any resources of any kind at all. And these particular people—and, you know, God knows why—well, they just don't like us." A lowbrow in training, Jack has been eaten alive by his envy of the intellectual élite and by the sense of inadequacy they have instilled in him. "I was clever enough to know that John Donne was offering something that was awfully enjoyable—I just wasn't clever enough to actually enjoy it," he says. He continues, "I was kept out of it all, kept away. Howard, on the other hand, was let right in. Come in, they said. Here we are. Come talk, come be with us." Extraordinary gifts require extraordinary vigilance; and Jack, who really *is* lazy, seeks release from the oppression of scruple and excellence—the disciplines of heart and mind that are the gifts of surplus. Confronted with violent upheaval—the disappearances, the murders, the long jail sentences—Jack succumbs to his own incipient barbarity. "How much longer could I keep on pretending to be hurt and shocked by unspeakable acts?" he asks at the end of Act I. Jack is not just numb; he is morally bankrupt.

At the beginning of Act II, Gregory leads the audience into the neon glare of a squash court on the floor below. Shawn and Eisenberg are already there, although only the tops of their heads are visible, until we walk around the sofa they occupy and take our seats. Here, in the aftermath of the uprising, we witness the full trajectory of Jack's decline. "What *was* the self," Jack wonders out loud. "I understood that my self was just a pile of bric-a-brac—just everything my life had quite by chance piled up—everything I'd seen or heard or experienced—meticulously, pointlessly piled up and saved, a heap of nothing." Shawn and David Mamet are the only contemporary American playwrights who debate the nature of individualism and its "I"—"this strange little thing that everyone has, this odd, tiny organ which the surgeons can't touch." In his version of the hilarious sophistry of Swift's "A Modest Proposal," Jack finds happiness by surrendering to the senses. "Let me learn how to repose in the quiet shade of a nice square of chocolate, a nice slice of cake," he says. He wills himself back to the primitive, and, in the process, he abdicates love, loyalty, knowledge, excellence, meaning. In the privacy of his bathtub, in an experiment he deems a success, Jack pisses on poetry, takes a shit on books. "Things were shrinking for me—everything was shrinking," he says. "Sometimes even trying to read the paper, you know, was sort of like spooning food into the mouth of someone who you happen to notice has suddenly died. So actually the thing that became most real, most visible, for me was this little collection of, actually, sex magazines." When Jack finds his bliss, it's the amnesia of ignorance. "I was forgetting," he says, imagining John Donne crying at not being remembered by future generations. "Forgetting his name, forgetting him, and forgetting all the ones who remembered him."

At the end of the play, the actors file out, followed by Gregory, and we are left to applaud the palpable, punishing vacancy that is the production's most awesome accomplishment. "The Designated Mourner" is, I think, among our generation's few great plays, one of the most memorable evenings of theatregoing in my life. It traps, with irony, the grief and fury behind our culture's delirium of distraction. "The actors will be on the third floor if you want to join them," a production assistant told the audience as it filed out. So I did. Over the course of three hours, Gregory and Shawn had managed to break almost every rule of the theatre, so why not this last one? ♦

TULLIO PERICOLI

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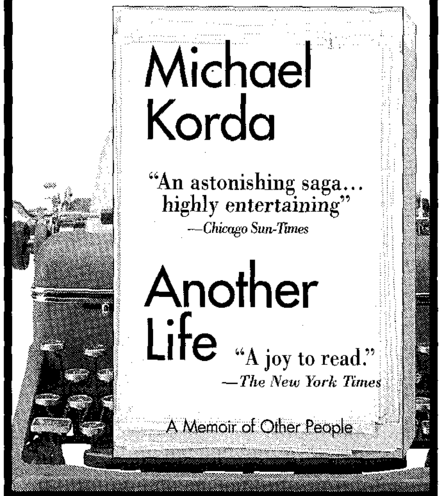
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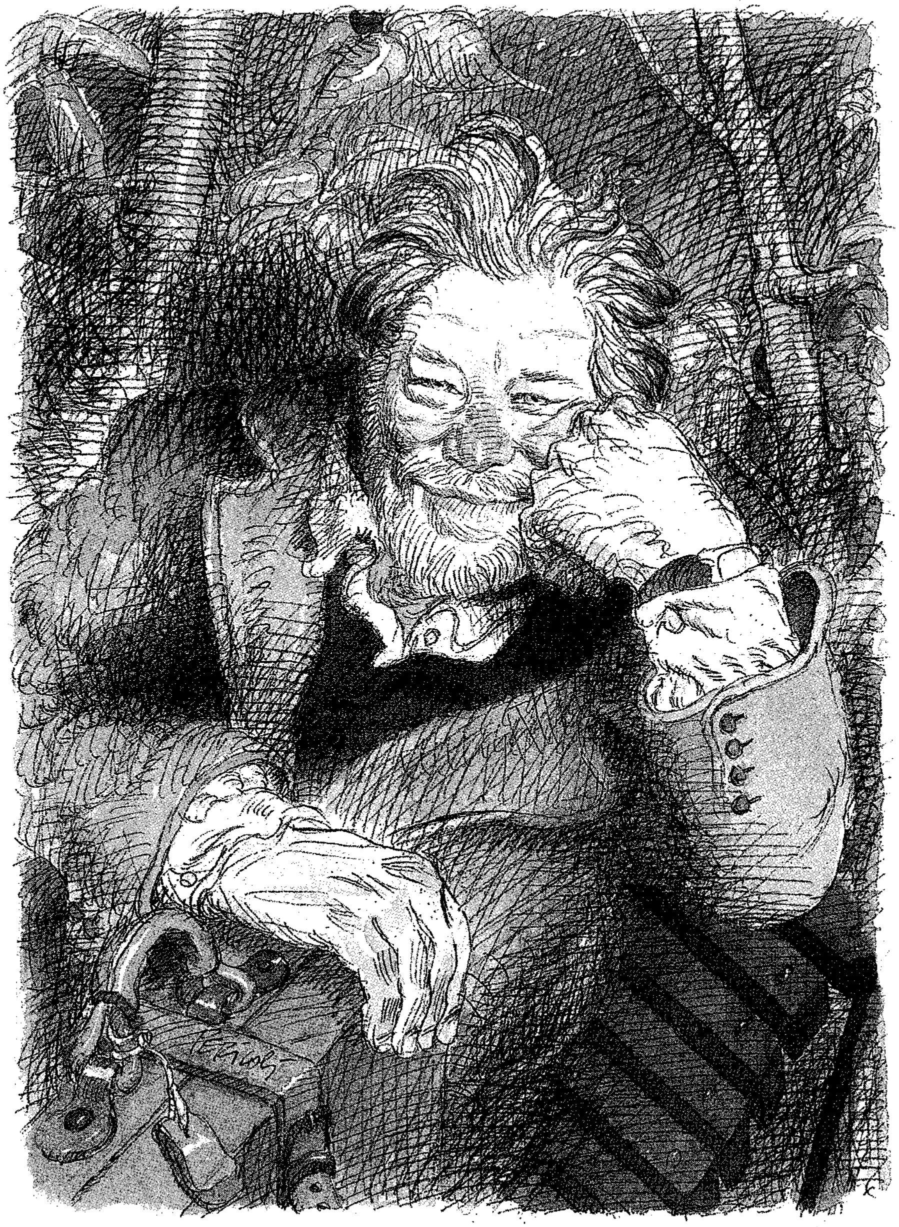
DANGEROUS INTO BEAUTIFUL

An expatriate novelist returns home.

BY JOHN UPDIKE

Those of us who, baffled by some of the gaps and unlikelihoods of the dazzling movie "The English Patient," turned to the novel, by Michael Ondaatje, for elucidation, discovered that in fact it was the movie that elucidated the novel and was the clearer, more unified work. The burned patient was allowed to elect his death rather than just fade away; Ondaatje's devious spy plot, involving the Canadian David Caravaggio, was subdued; and the romance between Hana and Kip, the war-worn nurse and the Sikh sapper, yielded pride of place to the prewar adulterous affair between Katharine Clifton and Count László Almásy, which elicited from Kristin Scott Thomas one of the more dashing and affecting female screen performances of recent times. The novel's many admirers spoke of its "spooky ennui," its "dreamlike and enigmatic" qualities, its "poetry of smoke and mirrors." Ondaatje is a poet who has produced eleven books of verse since 1967, and one novel in each of the past three decades. Images are what interest him, and his fiction is already cinematic. In his new novel, "Anil's Ghost" (Knopf; $25), some of the ruling images are: the physical wounds inflicted by Sri Lankan civil strife as it raged from the mid-nineteen-eighties to the early nineteen-nineties; a skeleton, tricksomely named Sailor, upon whose evidence our heroine, Anil Tissera, a thirty-three-year-old forensic anthropologist sent by the U.N. to investigate a number of murders on the island, hopes to incriminate the government itself; a man crucified on the tarmac of a highway, nails driven through his palms; swimming, a natural activity in this hot place and one in which Anil famously excelled at the age of sixteen, the fastest female in a two-mile race out to a buoy and back; the painting of the eyes of a statue of Buddha, which the painter must do while looking in a mirror held by an assistant, since the eyes are the fuse that gives the statue its life as a holy god. This last image should make an especially haunting cinematic moment, and ends the book with a wide panning shot, through the Buddha's freshly bestowed eyes.


In "Anil's Ghost," Michael Ondaatje takes us to a Sri Lanka torn by civil strife.

Anil (a man's name, which she purchased from her brother in early adolescence with "one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded") was born in Sri Lanka but for fifteen years has been away, studying medicine in London and then the United States, learning her forensic anthropology in Oklahoma and Arizona. Fond memories of her American years flicker through her head—the gallows humor in the lab, the after-hours bowling and visits to "wild suburban bars and clubs on the outskirts of Tulsa or Norman," the beauty of the desert, her friendships with a woman called Leaf Niedecker and with her lover, a science writer called Cullis Wright. Wright (not quite Mr. Right) is married and, after three years, she has left him; during a motel tryst, he tusslingly refused to release her until she stabbed him in the arm with a little knife used to cut an avocado. After she left, summoning a taxi in the middle of the night, "he lay in the dark room watching the twitch of his arm muscle flick the knife into movement," testing his powers of stoicism and our suspension of disbelief.

In Sri Lanka, Anil is assigned to work with an archeologist appointed by the government, Sarath Diyasena, "a broad-chested man in his late forties," and a whole new association develops from their joint investigations and travels with Sailor—an association but not physical intimacy, or even much of a friendship. Ondaatje is better at showing withheld emotions than declared ones; like Joan Didion, another laconic, lapidary exponent of the higher hugger-mugger, he lets a glancing indirection convey the unseen weight of a world of sinister secrets. He brings together strangers in fabulous settings—abandoned monasteries and tea plantations—as if these conjunctions themselves constituted significance. Access to the characters' inner lives is restricted to trickles of flashback, and a jumpy multiplicity of chapters and abruptly introduced themes scatters the story to the winds of empty portent. "The English Patient" was praised as "an exquisite ballet that takes place in the dark." "Anil's Ghost" feels overchoreographed. It has a skeleton at its center, and there is something absurdist about the focus. At one point, a tape recorder is hidden in Sailor's ribs, and at another a drunk carries the skeleton in his arms—wouldn't it, unwired-together, fall apart? Amid so much Ceylonese murder, so much explosion and torture and suicide, will one identification (which comes, at last, almost casually) make a novel's worth of difference? The main movement of the plot, Sarath's dangerous collusion with Anil, occurs beneath a surface etched with exotic detours, and at the end Anil's fate is merely implied. The warmest, most intelligible figure in the book is Sarath's younger brother, Gamini, a youthful carouser who becomes, as do most of his fellow-doctors, a martyr to the overwhelming workload that the national violence has thrust upon them.

This material is precious to Ondaatje, who, like his heroine, is a North American expatriate from Sri Lanka. Pages of acknowledgments testify to hours spent in researching such technical texts as "Injuries Due to Anti-Personnel Landmines in Sri Lanka," by G. Goonetileke, and "Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell," by Christopher Joyce and Eric Stover, and in interviewing doctors and hospital staff in the author's afflicted homeland. For a harrowing two pages, we are inside the mind and loose, loaded shirt of a human bomb about to explode five yards from the Sri Lankan President. The horrific scenes of hospital care and the details of injury and atrocity and torture are the most vivid images the reader carries away, and should do much to make the remote, tangled, and prolonged civil wars in what was once Ceylon vivid to Americans. Ondaatje's willingness—nay, eagerness—to look human suffering in the face is one of his compelling virtues, and gives his dreamlike montages their stern depth. His first novel, an arty yet convincingly gritty meditation on the life of jazz's legendary first great horn player, Buddy Bolden, was oddly titled "Coming Through Slaughter." The phrase sets a tone for the fiction that follows, and harks back to "The Collected Works of Billy the Kid," a 1970 cycle of murderous poems and prose passages centered upon another low-class madman from the southern United States.

Slaughter is part of life, and has its gory glamour. But it is not all of life. In "Anil's Ghost," a dynamited Buddha is patiently reassembled; two estranged brothers are reunited in the civil disorder; a kidnapped doctor and a band of boyish Tamil guerrillas enjoy a birthday swim together; the constructive and merciful forces of the world continue to make themselves felt. Artifice, present on every page of Ondaatje's delicate, careful prose, works on the side of the angels; Ananda, the painter of eyes, a despairing drunk whose young wife is among the victims of terrorism, "knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation." Two pieces of wordplay in Sinhala, Sri Lanka's main language, frame the contrast. A flight of steps leading to a deserted temple was once marked with a sign that read, "Warning: When It Rains, These Steps Are Dangerous," but "someone had altered one Sinhala syllable on the sign, so it now read, 'Warning: When It Rains, These Steps Are Beautiful.' " And in a room in a tenantless plantation house someone has charcoalled on opposite walls the words *makamkruka* and *madanaraga*, the first meaning a demon of agitation and upheaval and the second "with the speed of love."

If the Sri Lanka of this book, created by a writer who left it for England and Canada at the age of eleven, seems more a land of signs and ghosts than of intelligible human relationships, and its civil conflicts less palpable than "The English Patient" 's Second World War, the very thinness carries its present truth, of a world being emptied of the traditional satisfactions of peace (family, procreation, veneration), a hyperactive and well-armed world where violence is too easy. ♦

BOOKS

LASER SHOW

Star Wars, or The Sting.

BY HENDRIK HERTZBERG

Of all the summit meetings between American Presidents and Soviet Communist Party chiefs during the forty-odd years of the Cold War, by far the wildest was the one that took place in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, over the weekend of October 11 and 12, 1986. What happened there was astounding enough. But even more astounding was what *almost* happened. And what almost happened was—well, let's imagine how the Monday papers, under huge, black, V-J Day-sized headlines, might have covered the story:

> REYKJAVIK, October 12—The United States and the Soviet Union agreed tonight to dismantle their entire nuclear arsenals by the end of 1996.
>
> The stunning announcement came shortly before midnight, when President Ronald

> Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, smiling broadly, emerged arm in arm from two days of intensive, around-the-clock negotiations at Hofdi House, a modest villa on a bleak plain overlooking the ocean.
>
> "The Cold War is over," Mr. Reagan said, as Mr. Gorbachev nodded vigorously at his side. "We have seized a historic chance," the Soviet leader chimed in.
>
> The two leaders said in a joint communiqué that 50 per cent of Soviet and American strategic nuclear stockpiles will be dismantled by 1992. The remaining 50 per cent, including "all ballistic missiles," will be scrapped during a second five-year period. Almost as an afterthought, the communiqué said that "all nuclear weapons," presumably including tactical and battlefield nuclear arms, will also be eliminated.
>
> A formal treaty embodying the accord will be signed after technical details are hammered out, probably by the end of the year, officials said.
>
> What the President called tonight "the most sweeping and important arms-control agreement in the history of the world" climaxed a weekend of tumultuous talks in which the mood of negotiators veered from exaltation to despair and back again.
>
> Soviet and U.S. officials said separately that the key breakthrough was an unexpected, last-minute deal on the thorny issue of anti-ballistic-missile defenses.

And so on. The story writes itself, as they say on the copy desk.

It didn't turn out that way, of course. In "Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War" (Simon & Schuster; $30), Frances FitzGerald reminds us that Reykjavik ended in tears—literally. At a press briefing just after the final session, the eyes of Max Kampelman, Reagan's chief arms negotiator, were brimming. The lips of George Shultz, the normally stone-faced Secretary of State, trembled as he pronounced himself "deeply disappointed." "We missed a historic chance" is what Gorbachev actually said that night. Everybody—Russians and Americans alike—looked grief-stricken.

As for Reagan, he skipped the postmortems. He had earlier sulked that he wanted to get home for Sunday dinner with Nancy, and he left angry—not only at Gorbachev but also at his own aides, who had pleaded with him to stick around long enough to force Gorbachev to be the one who said nyet. "There were only so many sacrifices Reagan was willing to make on the altar of public opinion," FitzGerald writes, in one of her few forays into sarcasm, "and staying in Reykjavik another night was not one of them."

The Reagan team quickly stopped all talk of disappointment or anger; a midterm election was at hand. By the following weekend, a huge publicity blitz was under way, portraying the President not only as a tough negotiator who had gone eyeball to eyeball with the blinkin' Russians but also as a man of peace who had offered them, in his words, "the most sweeping and important arms-reduction proposal in the history of the world." Republican poll ratings immediately shot up. (As for "The Cold War is over," Reagan did say that, verbatim—but not until a couple of years later, just after George Bush's inauguration. The new President, annoyed, had his people put out the word that the old boy had gone soft.)

In the years since Reykjavik, two competing explanations of what happened there have hardened into stone. The first, favored by Reagan's supporters, is that Reagan stood up to the perfidious Soviets. The second, favored by Reagan's critics (and, quietly, by a few of his former aides), is that he torpedoed an epochal accord by stupidly and obstinately refusing to give up his precious—but actually worthless—Strategic Defense Initiative, the expensive, implausible program of exotic space defenses dubbed Star Wars by the press.

At Reykjavik, Reagan and Gorbachev dropped the ball.

JACQUES PAVLOVSKY/CORBIS-SYGMA

If only Reagan had come to his senses about S.D.I., as these critics wish he had, the next few paragraphs of Monday's story might have read as follows:

> The missile-defense compromise came at the last minute, when Mr. Reagan suddenly acceded to Mr. Gorbachev's demand that the 1972 Anti-Ballistic-Missile Treaty remain in force throughout the ten-year life of the new arms pact.
>
> Speaking on background, a high U.S. official called the concession "essentially meaningless."
>
> "There's no way S.D.I. could be ready for deployment by 1996, maybe not even by the year 2000," the official said, referring to Mr. Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, the so-called Star Wars program. "But for some reason Gorbachev thinks it's a big deal."
>
> Last night's agreement permits "laboratory research" on missile defenses to continue, the official pointed out. "If the Soviets try to pull a fast one," he added, "we'll be ready for them."

Frances FitzGerald points out that none of Reagan's advisers—not Shultz; not Caspar Weinberger, the Secretary of Defense, or his ultra-hardline deputy, Richard Perle; not Robert McFarlane, Reagan's national-security adviser—shared their boss's fantasy of a space shield that would protect the American population from an all-out Soviet strike

"Your dog has told me so much about you—all good, I might add."

• •

and render nuclear weapons obsolete, any more than they shared his fantasy of total nuclear disarmament. They saw both ideas as instances of Reagan's talent for beguiling the public with pretty stories. But, for varying reasons, they all played along. Perle liked S.D.I. as a poison pill against arms-control agreements with the Soviet Union, which he viewed as fatal to Western will. It was Perle who had expressly designed the "zero option"—an earlier disarmament offer, whereby the Soviet Union would dismantle its already deployed medium-range missiles in Europe in exchange for an American promise not to deploy similar missiles (i.e., in exchange for nothing)—to be unacceptable to the Soviets. McFarlane liked S.D.I. as a bargaining chip; trading the vaporware of Star Wars for the hardware of actually existing Soviet missiles, he thought, would be the greatest sting in history. And nobody wanted to risk angering Reagan, who regarded S.D.I. as his baby and, in his passive-aggressive way, froze out anyone who expressed doubts about it.

Besides Reagan's toughness and Reagan's stupidity, though, there is a third explanation for the Reykjavik debacle: that it was Gorbachev's fault, not Reagan's. FitzGerald does not discuss this possibility, though her book contains considerable support for it. Nobody has ever accused Gorbachev of being stupid. So why didn't *he* just say yes? Monday's paper:

> The compromise came at the last minute, when Mr. Gorbachev suddenly dropped his objections to missile-defense testing in exchange for an American promise to share the technology and not to deploy missile defenses for at least the ten-year life of the new pact.
>
> The two sides agreed that the 1972 Anti-Ballistic-Missile Treaty will remain in force. But the treaty will be interpreted to permit field tests of exotic technologies like lasers.
>
> Speaking on background, a high Soviet official called the concession "essentially meaningless."
>
> "There's no way S.D.I. could have been ready for deployment by 1996, if ever," the Soviet official said, referring to America's Strategic Defense Initiative, the so-called Star Wars program. "We don't think it will even work," he added. "But if you want to waste money on Buck Rogers toys, go right ahead."

With a simple *da*, in other words, Gorbachev could have made McFarlane's sting his own.

There is a hint in "Way Out There in the Blue" that, but for timing, this could have happened. Apart from Reagan himself, the members of the Soviet high command seem to have been the only people on earth who were convinced that Star Wars was going to render their nuclear weapons obsolete. The Russians were in awe of American technology. Like Reagan, they believed what they saw in Hollywood movies. Nor had it escaped their attention that Americans had visited the moon. Those who had been to the United States evidently came away deeply impressed by doodads like cable TV, two-line telephones, and stores with goods on the shelves. Surely, they seem to have reasoned, the country that had invented the Jacuzzi would have little trouble shooting down a bunch of big, clumsy Soviet missiles.

Whatever the reason, by the time of the Reykjavik summit the Soviets had bought the S.D.I. sales pitch—hook, line, and laser. Two months later, in December, 1986, Gorbachev called Andrei Sakharov to tell him he could come home from Gorki, the sad-sack provincial city to which Leonid Brezhnev had exiled him. Back in Moscow, Sakharov, as was his wont, began to speak his mind about any number of things. One of those things was nuclear weapons—a subject upon which, as the father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, he could speak with technical expertise as well as moral authority. In February, 1987, at a meeting of scientists, he dismissed S.D.I. as a "Maginot line in space," adding that "agreements on disarmament should be negotiated as soon as possible, independently of S.D.I., in accordance with the understanding laid out at Reykjavik." Soon thereafter, Gorbachev accepted Perle's "zero option" on intermediate-range missiles in Europe without asking for any concessions on S.D.I. Reagan, needing a success to counteract the Iran-Contra affair, accepted Gorbachev's acceptance. The two men put their signatures on the I.N.F. treaty in December of 1987, in Washington. In private, Reagan told Gorbachev that if S.D.I. proved workable the United States was determined to deploy it. FitzGerald, drawing on Strobe Talbott's account, records Gorbachev's reply. Speaking without sarcasm or rancor, the Soviet leader said, "Mr. President, you do what you think you have to do. . . . I think you're wasting money. I don't think it will work. But if that's what you want to do, go ahead."

Too bad Gorbachev hadn't thought to release Sakharov a little earlier.

"Way Out There in the Blue" is essentially a narrative account of the bureaucratic politics surrounding arms control inside the Reagan Administration. It is a very good book. It is clearly and vigorously written. It fashions a vivid, suspenseful story from the unpromising materials of policy-wonkery. It is filled with sharp sketches of important members of Reagan's national-security team. Its portrait of Reagan himself is nuanced, without caricature, occasionally sympathetic, and no more devastating than the facts require. It contains little in the way of original primary research: FitzGerald hasn't done much legwork. But she has done heroic chairwork. She has read and digested prodigious quantities of material—articles, congressional and Presidential documents, and, especially, books: her bibliography lists a hundred and eighty-three titles. Many of them are memoirs, of which the Reagan Administration generated an unusually rich supply. By drawing together thousands of snapshots and arranging them side by side along a timeline, she achieves a stereoptic effect. This isn't just a picture of the Reagan Administration's arms-control machinations—it's a hologram.

FitzGerald's scope, however, is narrower than her subtitle implies. Her only written Soviet sources are the American editions of books by Gorbachev, Sakharov, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Anatoly Dobrynin. Of the forty-one names on her list of supplementary interviews, only one is Russian, that of a certain Pavel Podvig, whose name appears nowhere in the text or footnotes and whom she does not identify. (He is a Moscow-based arms-control researcher.) What FitzGerald doesn't provide—can't provide, given her focus—is a fully convincing history of the end of the Cold War, because the decisions that ended the Cold War were made in Moscow by Russians, not in Washington by Americans.

The Cold War did not end because the Soviet Union "lost," in the sense that it yielded to superior force. Moscow was still many years from having exhausted its material ability to continue. Internal decay was such that a convulsion was on the way, but it could as easily have taken the form of a retreat into aggressive militarism; amassing weapons and armies, after all, was the only thing the Soviet system did reasonably well. The Cold War ended when it did and as it did—peacefully—because Gorbachev decided to drop the eschatological illusion that was the raison d'être not only of the Cold War but also, it turned out, of the Soviet Union itself: the notion that the regime represented the historically inevitable apogee of human political evolution. Gorbachev decided that Russia

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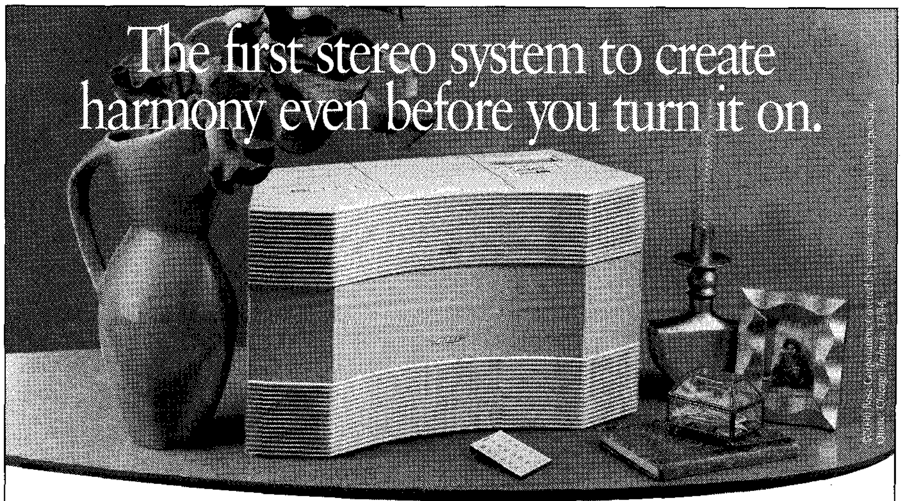
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should become a "normal" country, by which he seemed to mean a country where, at a minimum, the governing party holds office by virtue of something other than systematic repression and mass violence. And one of the things normal countries do not do is engage in open-ended wars to the death, cold or hot, with other normal countries.

This can be seen as a failure of nerve, a "collapse," but it can also be seen as an awakening. Once Gorbachev woke up—once he lifted the miasma of dull fear that had kept his country in a state of suspended political animation—the rest followed as day follows night. It was morning in Moscow.

The mostly firm, mostly patient policies of the West—including the policy of military containment—were indispensable in creating the external conditions under which Russia's internal awakening could occur. The effect of Star Wars, however, remains unclear. FitzGerald demonstrates only that the Russians *shouldn't* have taken it seriously. But if in fact it played some role, however marginal, in nudging the Soviet leaders toward their recognition that they were on a treadmill to nowhere, then it was a sting after all—maybe not the greatest in history (that would still have to be the Allies' Ultra project during the Second World War, or maybe the Greeks' wooden-horse gambit during the Trojan unpleasantness), but a pretty good one all the same.

Star Wars was not just one sting, though. It was a whole beehive full of them. Thanks to Star Wars, Gorbachev's hawkish advisers were conned into letting their boss make outlandish proposals for nuclear disarmament, because they thought, apparently, that Star Wars might produce some sort of ultimate weapon. Many on the American right were conned into agreeing with many on the American left that mutually assured destruction, the foundation stone of deterrence, was immoral. Reagan's hawks were conned into letting their boss make his outlandish proposals for total nuclear disarmament, because they thought Star Wars would guarantee Soviet rejection. (They were right, but they ended up having to swallow their own zero option for Europe.) If Reagan hadn't believed so fervently in Star Wars, he probably couldn't have conned himself into entertaining the idea of radical nuclear disarmament to begin with. The only palpable result of that illusion was the I.N.F. treaty, but the atmospherics of the Gorbachev-Reagan summits—Gorbymania in Washington, the two leaders' companionable stroll through Red Square, even the hope and heartbreak at Reykjavik—helped persuade the American and Soviet publics that Russia's awakening was real and probably irreversible.

Reagan, in his deeply weird way, understood this sooner and better than his conservative advisers and admirers. FitzGerald performs the useful chore of reminding us how clueless many of these people were. At a time when Soviet readers were devouring Orwell and Brodsky (and Gorbachev had just proposed multiparty elections), Robert Gates, Reagan's Director of Central Intelligence, said that Russia's "aggressive objectives abroad and essential totalitarianism at home remain largely unchanged." Just before Reagan left office, William Safire wrote of him sneeringly, "He professed to see in Mr. Gorbachev's eyes an end to the Soviet goal of world dominance." "How wildly wrong he is about what is happening in Moscow," George Will wrote that week, adding, "Reagan has accelerated the moral disarmament of the West—actual disarmament will follow—by elevating wishful thinking to the status of political philosophy." Caspar Weinberger, in a memoir published when the Berlin Wall was rubble, predicted that "no general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union will be allowed to alter in any fundamental way the basically aggressive nature of Soviet behavior."

Against this background, Reagan emerges, seemingly against FitzGerald's will, as the hero of her book. Her Reagan is comprehensively ignorant. He is petulant and aloof. He treats his subordinates the way he treats his children—genially, but with thoughtless cruelty. He often has no idea what is being said to him. He is unaware of the distinction between fantasy and reality. Does he contradict himself? Very well then, he contradicts himself (though more in the style of Gracie Allen than that of Walt Whitman). He is a stopped clock, but at one or two important junctures he tells the correct time. As his ideological confrères wallow in Spenglerian gloom, he announces that the Soviet Union is a flash in the historical pan. As his aides compete to see who can sound toughest, he somehow stampedes them toward a utopian vision of perfect peace. As his successor insists angrily that the Cold War is *not* over, he points out that it is. He may not know what he's doing, but he does it very well.

It's worth lingering a moment more over what might be different today if only one side or the other had had the mother wit to pry itself unstuck from the sticking point at Reykjavik. Russia, instead of retaining a nuclear force containing some six thousand strategic warheads—and keeping that force on "constant alert," as the *Times* reported last week—would now have none at all, or, more realistically, the few score or few hundred required for what strategists call "minimal deterrence" and fishermen call boasting rights. Similarly unencumbered, we would be in a strong position to make nonproliferation a reality.

Best of all, from the viewpoint of anybody reading the papers over the past couple of weeks, there would be no news stories about how America's insistence on building a missile-defense system is screwing up arms-control negotiations with the Russians. The *Times* would not have reported last Monday that if such a system goes forth Russia might "deploy new multiwarhead missiles, abandon the agreement banning medium-range missiles and even withdraw from the accord limiting conventional arms in Europe."

If Reagan had said yes back in 1986, S.D.I. would be remembered today as the stroke of diplomatic genius that built the bridge to the new millennium. If Gorbachev had said yes, Congress would have rapidly lost interest in spending billions to defend against a threat that was vanishing before its eyes. Either way, missile defenses would not have been fetishized by American conservatives and Russian revanchists. And we would not be reading paragraphs like this one, from the Washington *Post* of April 27th:

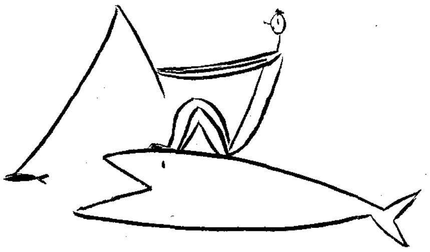
> Clinton Administration officials have indicated that at the summit they may offer the Russians a "grand bargain," in which the United States would agree to deep cuts that Russia is seeking in both sides' nuclear arsenals in return for Russian agreement to amend the ABM Treaty.

Here is S.D.I.'s ultimate sting: this is the same "grand bargain" that was on offer in 1986. Only, back then it was the Russians who were doing the coaxing. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Lightning on the Sun, *by Robert Bingham (Doubleday; $23.95).* Toward the end of this first novel, a young American woman in Phnom Penh watches a child slip beneath the surface of a flooded street and disappear, "sucked into a manhole uncovered to facilitate drainage." Bingham's swift, charged tale of a heroin-smuggling scheme gone awry exerts a similar dark and downward pull on the reader. The atmosphere recalls Robert Stone's "Dog Soldiers," but the author's rendering of the venality, greed, and constant menace of contemporary Cambodia—and of the loopiness of expatriate life there—is entirely his own. So is the gallows humor and the surprising tenderness of the characters' haphazard couplings. Bingham, who died last year of an accidental overdose, was at home in the abyss, and he left behind a wickedly true telling of the world he knew.

Selected Letters of Rebecca West, *edited by Bonnie Kime Scott (Yale; $35).* "I write this letter without any real hope that the truth will prevail," Dame Rebecca lamented in her last years. Brilliant, funny, vulnerable, combative: the bulk of these splendid letters find West trying to set one record or another straight. Her (often berated) correspondents included Harold Ross, Anaïs Nin, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Ingrid Bergman (to whom she wrote, "You may love your husband"—Roberto Rossellini—"very much, but you must face the fact that he has no talent"). There is ample documentation of West's travels in the Balkans (the grist for her 1941 classic, "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon"), of her liaison with H. G. Wells, and of her troubled relationship with their son, Anthony West; the letters are punctuated by her irritation and grief over the fact that his memory of his childhood diverges so sharply from her own.



In the Heart of the Sea, *by Nathaniel Philbrick (Viking; $24.95).* On November 20, 1820, the Nantucket whaleship Essex was rammed by a large sperm whale and sank in the Pacific, "just about as far from land as it was possible to be anywhere on earth." The episode inspired Melville, but this climactic moment proves less interesting than the story of the survivors' voyage in the ship's whaleboats, a months-long ordeal that included madness and cannibalism. Philbrick nicely links the experiences aboard ship with the values of Nantucket society, and explains how the women consoled themselves during their men's three-year absences—with laudanum and dildos.

Virtual Tibet, *by Orville Schell (Metropolitan; $26).* Long before Richard Gere discovered the Dalai Lama, centuries of explorers' tales had transformed Tibet into a mythic kingdom, unsullied by material concerns. Schell's chronicle of Hollywood's recent fascination with Tibetan politics and religion (in which an audience with Brad Pitt proves harder to obtain than one with His Holiness) nimbly separates fact from fiction. The result is a compassionate and comic exploration of our "virtual era," when history, news, and entertainment combine to provide "a more visually and dramatically pleasing" version of reality.

The Blue Bedspread, *by Raj Kamal Jha (Random House; $21.95).* Like a surreal landscape glimpsed through a train window, Jha's début novel makes us question how much of what we remember is true. In the course of one unseasonably warm night in Calcutta, a man writes a family history for the baby of his sister, who died in childbirth. It is a story filled with violence: beatings, incest, and murder. Thankfully, Jha understands that even horror must be accompanied by solace, and when he evokes ordinary pleasures—the familiarity, say, of a blue bedspread—we're convinced and moved by the talismanic power of recollection.

ANITA DESAI
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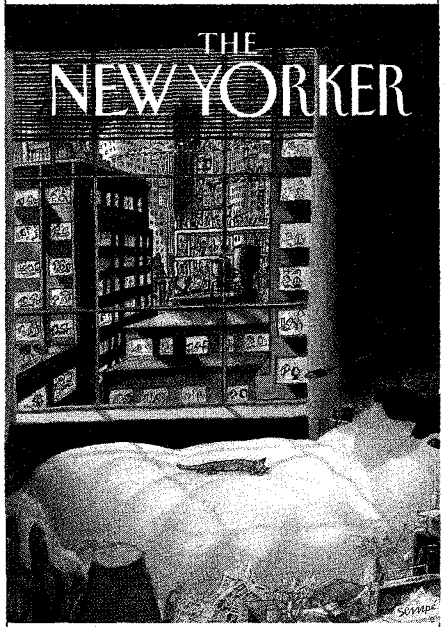

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DANCING

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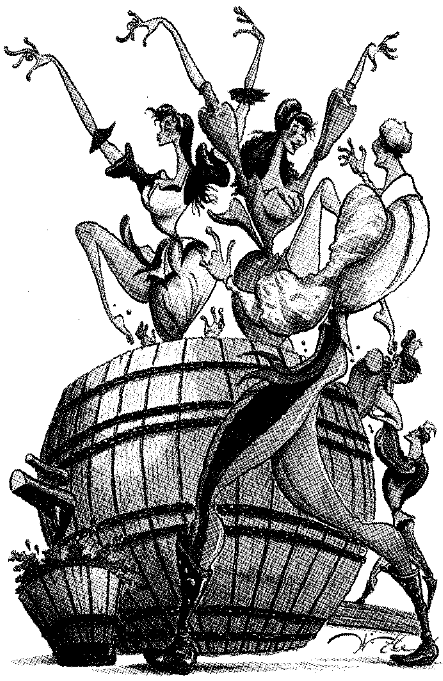
What the Broadway revivals have wrought.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Everybody's saying it, and it's true: Broadway is dancing again. We're seeing entire shows that are nothing but dance and music: "Fosse," "Riverdance," "Tango Argentino," "Swing!" In book musicals, too, the dancing is longer and better than it would have been ten years ago. Most tellingly, there are shows *about* dancing, its moral balm: how dancing makes us kinder and happier, more likely to love and be loved, less likely to go out and hang ourselves. (In "Contact," a visit to a dance club saves a man from suicide.) This is not a new theme; it was the subtext of all the Astaire-Rogers movies. In the new shows, however, it has acquired a political dimension. In "Footloose" and in "Saturday Night Fever"—and also in Nicholas Hytner's new dance movie, "Center Stage"—dancing combats narrow-mindedness, gives opportunities to poor kids, fights racial injustice.

But forget the dance, look at the dancers. Broadway has long been racially integrated in the sense of including black people or, at least, black men. But to see that the best couple in "Swing!" is a black-white couple, Ryan Francois and Jenny Thomas, and to read in the program bios that they are husband and wife, still makes an impression. In "Kiss Me, Kate," the *stars*, Brian Stokes Mitchell and Marin Mazzie, are a black-white couple. That show also features an Asian man (Darren Lee)—a rare sight on Broadway. Even more striking than the racial message is the sexual message. Goodbye slim thighs and ponytails. Hello dye jobs and big rears. Second-stage feminism has hit Broadway, and Broadway is buying it fancy underwear. Meanwhile, the gay men, always a strong contingent on Broadway, are no longer trying to look straight. Our whole new political agenda is up there on the stage, and most of the time it's not preachy—it's nice. One is grateful to see a real bottom doing the black bottom. Furthermore, it seems unquestionable that one of the reasons the Broadway chorus line looks so terrific is that our current politics has allowed casting directors to draw from a larger pool of applicants.

From the thirties through the sixties, Broadway show dancing had a golden age, followed by a sort of silver age in the seventies. But with the decline of dance music and the rise of dance-poor English musicals, notably Andrew Lloyd Webber's, the field began to dry up. After the deaths of Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett, both in 1987, there was not a single top-drawer artist choreographing regularly on Broadway. There were some good journeymen—Tommy Tune, for example—and together with choreographers who drew on beyond-Broadway traditions, such as tap and tango, they woke up Broadway dance now and then. But I am looking right now at the list of musicals nominated for the Tony Award in choreography during



Kathleen Marshall's "Cantiamo d'Amore" dance for "Kiss Me, Kate."

MICHAEL WITTE

the late eighties and early nineties, and boy, were those nominators scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Now we have a reversal. Why? Maybe it's just a cycle-of-history phenomenon, but I think there are a few more timely factors involved, above all the retro-mindedness of the past two decades, which locked in with box-office anxiety—how to compete with Lloyd Webber?—to produce the spate of revivals that we have seen in recent years: "Gypsy," "Guys and Dolls," "Carousel," "Show Boat," "The King and I," and so on. Meanwhile, the excellent Encores! series, at City Center, has brought back other classics in semi-staged form. There's been a lot of hand-wringing among theatre critics about this cavalcade of revivals—they want to know why we can't make something new—but the fact is that the old musicals had a lot of good dance music, and hence a lot of dancing. When the revival included the original choreography, it reminded people of what show dancing once was. And when the dances weren't original they were often the work of young choreographers trying to live up to the standard of their elders.

Looking at today's Broadway musicals, I see three big trends. One, the least dance-friendly, is post-Lloyd Webber. There are signs that the tidal wave of earnest vulgarity represented by his shows may at last be receding from our shore. "Cats" is closing, after eighteen years. But don't uncork the champagne yet: "Jesus Christ Superstar" just reopened. Furthermore, the influence—indeed, the staffing—of the Lloyd Webber shows has infected the Disney productions. "The Lion King" and "Aida" both have the same sort of sincere, dumb lyrics as "Jesus Christ Superstar": no surprise, since Tim Rice was the lyricist for all three. And whereas "The Lion King" had some handsome neo-African dances by Garth Fagan, the most elaborate dance numbers in "Aida"—for the bad guys, brandishing chrome lances—are like MTV. The Disney shows will not be the place to look for Broadway's dance renaissance.

Another trend is the Bob Fosse heritage. There are three Fosse or post-Fosse musicals on Broadway right now, the "Chicago" and "Cabaret" revivals, plus the anthology show "Fosse." Today's young choreographers have clearly been to see them. One of the trademarks of Fosse's late work was a "come-forward" structure. Instead of having the dance emerge from the action—the Sharks and the Jets are rumbling, and, my goodness, suddenly they're dancing—he had his characters just step forward to do their numbers, as in vaudeville ("Chicago") or a night club ("Cabaret"). You can see this same gambit, and its consequences—the gain of sophistication, the loss of plot power—in the two "Wild Party" musicals that opened this year: the Andrew Lippa version, with excellent dances by Mark Dendy, which closed last month, and the Michael John LaChiusa/George C. Wolfe version, with desultory half dances by Joey McKneely, which, life being what it is, is still playing. Another Fosse trait that marks these productions is sheer dirtiness. Both shows feature orgies, over which few veils are drawn. At Lippa's party I believe I saw a woman humping a piano stool. Another woman, while flirting with the hero, pulls down her pants and urinates into an onstage toilet. I do not speak of more canonical acts, homo and hetero. Some of this is well done and funny, or it is in the Lippa. (In the LaChiusa/Wolfe it's mostly ugly.) But never mind the orgy shows. In many current musicals, the chorus line looks older, wiser, been-around-the-block. This is "Chicago" speaking.

A third important factor in today's show dancing is the revivals. That's where we got what are now the biggest choreographic talents on Broadway. One is Susan Stroman, who choreographed the 1994 "Show Boat" revival, together with the 1998 London production of "Oklahoma!" that at last seems to be coming our way. Another is Kathleen Marshall, who is the artistic director of the Encores! series and who also recently mounted the early Stephen Sondheim musical "Saturday Night." (Yet another is Rob Marshall, Kathleen's brother, who choreographed the restagings of "Cabaret," "Damn Yankees," "She Loves Me," and "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." But Rob has gotten a lot of attention. Let's look at Kathleen.) Both Stroman and Marshall are studious girls who, when they take on a show, go first to the library, to research the dances of the period, and who seem

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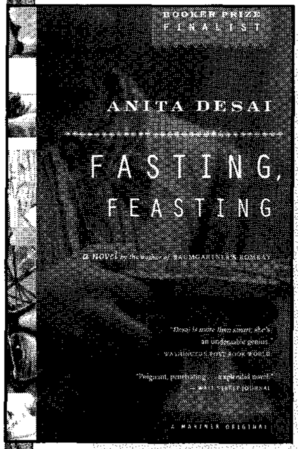

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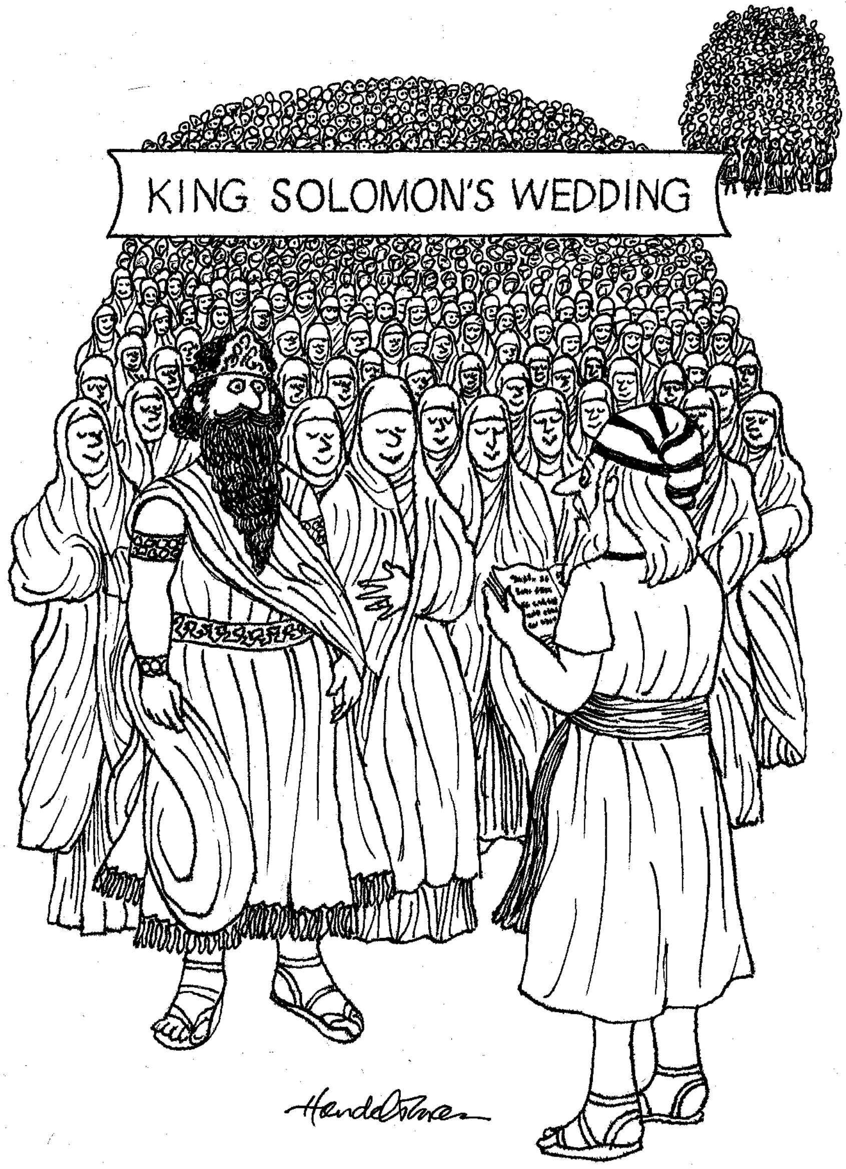
to want, more than anything else, just to stir up the same kind of excitement that they felt over "South Pacific" when they were twelve years old.

Stroman's first big hit was the 1992 "Crazy for You," and that show demonstrated what is still her most sterling virtue, her ability to create a big, wild, set-the-house-on-fire number, a dance that makes use of every prop at hand, that includes every child and bellhop within calling distance. When, in the "Seventy-Six Trombones" number in the recently opened "Music Man" (which she directed as well as choreographed), she mobilizes first the leads, then River City's matrons, then the school board, then God knows who else, marching over the top of a piano and doing backflips, the audience practically leaps up for joy. They *want* this kind of number; they think it should be included in the ticket price.

Apart from her skill with showstoppers, Stroman just has enormous stage smarts. In her productions, things begin and end when they should; transitions are handled smoothly; minor characters are fleshed out just enough so that you remember, in Act III, who they were in Act I. Also, she is wonderful with music, as is clear in "The Music Man." That the immensely difficult song "Trouble"—the one where fast-talking Harold Hill, by uttering what seems like about three sentences for every three notes, persuades the townspeople to believe there's trouble in River City, trouble from which they can be rescued by ordering several hundred dollars' worth of trombones from him—comes off so thrillingly is certainly owing to Craig Bierko, who plays Hill, but Stroman is the person who directed him. And from what she told an interviewer, one of her major reasons for casting Bierko was that he could handle that song. (Would that she had prevented the tech director from overmiking it and every other song in the show.)

What Stroman doesn't have is any new ideas. From "Crazy for You" to "Show Boat" to "Steel Pier" to "Contact" to "The Music Man"—and also her recent dances for the Martha Graham Company, New York City Ballet, and Nicholas Hytner's "Center Stage"—her themes are ordinary, clichéd, shopworn. She is the major purveyor of Broadway's current Rousseauvianism: if we'd all just be natural, and dance, we would have good lives, and maybe even get laid. As the jazz-dance teacher in "Center Stage" says to her class, "Fuhggedabout the steps, just dance the shit out of it." This is followed by a Stroman routine that the participants dance the shit out of, whereupon our starring couple tear out of the studio and go have sex. In the first section of "Contact" the leads copulate, quite realistically, *while* they're dancing—on a swing, no less. Not only is Stroman a cornball; she doesn't have much taste. But she's got craft, and a lot of oomph.

Where Stroman's specialty is the blatant, Kathleen Marshall's is the subtle. In the new "Kiss Me, Kate," Marshall gives us the big, brassy number ("Too Darn Hot") and the big acrobatic number ("Tom, Dick or Harry"), but still, throughout, she is true to her gifts—wit, nuance, class. She is an utterly convinced realist. In "The Music Man," farm boys do multiple pirouettes on library tables if that's what Stroman thinks she needs in order to goose up the dance. In "Kiss Me, Kate," nothing like this ever happens. No character does in a dance anything that he or she couldn't do as that character, in that setting. In "Wunderbar," the lead couple, remembering a show they were once in, and reprising its waltz in their dressing rooms, are made to negotiate door-

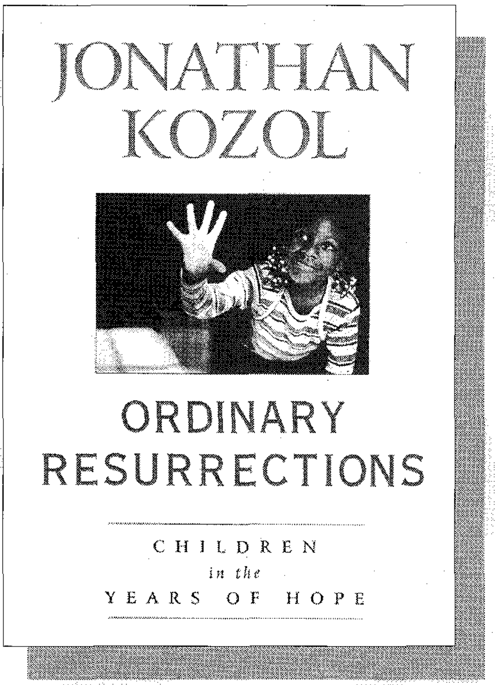


"You may kiss the brides. You may also kiss the concubines, but don't make a big tzimmes about it."

ways, chairs, cold-cream jars. In "Brush Up Your Shakespeare," the two gangsters don't do much that gangsters couldn't do. The big ensemble piece, "Too Darn Hot," includes not just the dancers but also the musicians of the "Taming of the Shrew" production that "Kiss Me, Kate" is about. One musician is fat, another klutzy, and they dance fat and klutzy. Marshall thinks we'll understand the joke, God bless her.

One is particularly grateful for Marshall's subtlety in the matter of sex. "Kiss Me, Kate," being by Cole Porter, is a pretty racy show, but in Marshall's dances nobody sticks his rear end in your face. The show's big sex number, "Cantiamo d'Amore," is a winemaking scene. The men strip off the women's stockings—this is enough, we get it—and then the women jump into the grape-pressing tub and grind, grind, grind (again, we get it) while their bosoms vibrate answeringly at the edge of the tub. This is the funniest, and sexiest, sex dance I have ever seen on Broadway. The world may be getting stupider, but now and then these smart people come along, people who know what a symbol is.

I guess we should be sorry that talents like Marshall's and Stroman's are being spent on revivals, and that these two women are largely *pasticheuses*, confessedly making dances in the style of Jerome Robbins or whomever. I, too, would be happier if they were working on new musicals. Soon they will be. The word is that Stroman is going to do the dances for "The Producers," a show that Mel Brooks is cooking up out of his great movie. Marshall's future projects include "Seussical," a musical based on Dr. Seuss's books. Good luck to them. But let me add that the weakest work I have ever seen by Stroman has been in new shows, "Contact" and "Steel Pier," not in revivals. Maybe Stroman and Marshall were put on earth precisely to reveal to us the glories of Broadway's past. Maybe musical theatre will become like opera, with a formidable, beloved old repertory and some pipsqueak modern contenders. If, on the other hand, we start making great musicals again, where will they take their inspiration, if not from exciting productions of the old musicals? As Marshall has said, "these are our twentieth-century classics." ♦



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THE ART WORLD

BARBARIANS AT THE GATE

The triumph of Picabia and Warhol, in two new shows.

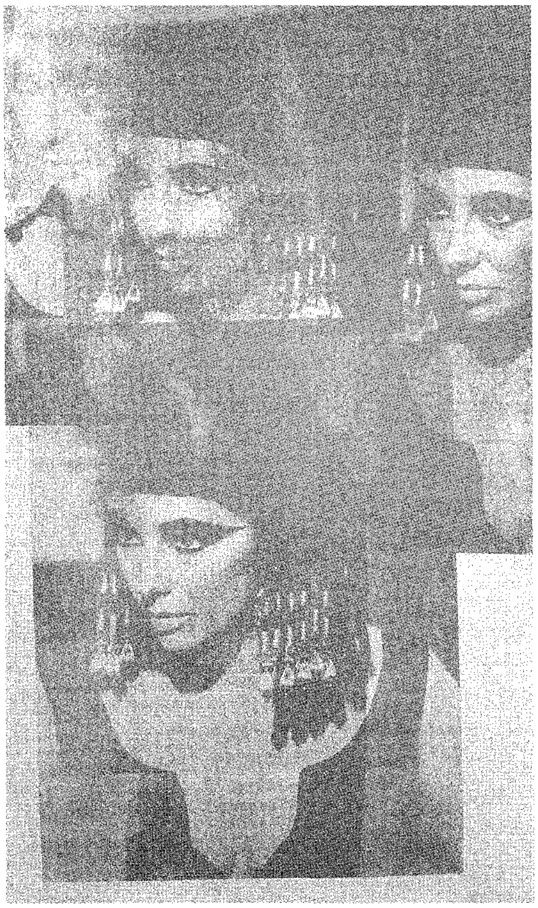
BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

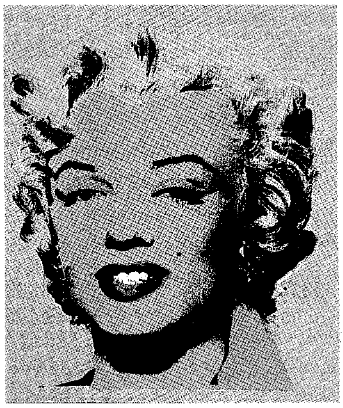
Two art-historically potent shows at Upper East Side galleries might be termed "museum quality," except that we should be so lucky in our museums today. At Michael Werner's new digs and at C&M Arts, work of the past comes to bear on the present with uncluttered éclat: at Werner's, forty-two of the legendary but seldom seen later paintings of the playboy Dadaist Francis Picabia are on display, and at C&M there is a rare concentration of twenty-nine vintage Marilyns, Lizzes, and Jackies by Andy Warhol (circa 1962-65). The Picabia show, which is on view through June 9th, is ugly and exhilarating. The Warhol, through June 3rd, feels definitive on the subject of contemporary beauty. ("Women of Warhol: Marilyn, Liz & Jackie," the show's title, rings oddly. It's hard to think of those plangent apparitions as women, or even as particularly human.) In each case, we sense a radical artist stepping ashore from the foundering vessel of twentieth-century taste, without so much as wet feet. Here are two bodies of work for a revamped, ruthlessly condensed modern canon.

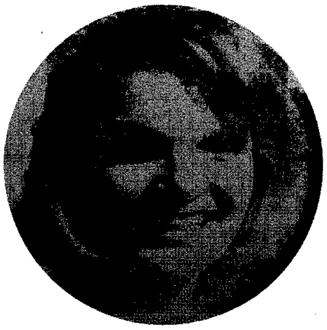
The shows surprise for opposite reasons. Picabia is well known for his First World War-era, double-entendre semi-abstractions of mechanical forms; the work he did after that, from the nineteen-twenties until his death, in 1953, has received such scant public exposure that the pocket retrospective at Werner suggests a début—although it's one that has an eerily familiar air, because of the work's sub-rosa influence on Sigmar Polke, David Salle, and other recent maverick stylists. Warhol's Marilyns are, of course, anything but obscure. Indeed, the semaphoric image of those eyes, those lips, and that hair seems fated to be the most lasting artistic icon of the past hundred years. But the original silk-screened paintings now suffer from a worldly condition that, when new, they brilliantly announced: the takeover of visual culture by reproductions. In effect, these Marilyns reproduce reproductions of reproductions, encapsulating several declensions from the suffering person of one Norma Jean Mortenson—a former person, who had recently died by her own hand when Warhol began the series, in 1962. That the works don't seem like disembodied layouts but are truly paintings—raw, handmade objects—registers as a tonic shock when they are viewed in person and in glorious variety. I believe that we ought to start all over again with our consideration of Warhol. This show is an ideal reset button.

Picabia is the joker in the pack of modern art, omitted from every hand of art history that has been dealt according to official rules. He made remarkable paintings in nearly every mode of his time, starting around the turn of the century, with Impressionism, and also in styles of his own devising. But his perversity made him effectively acceptance-proof. As the critic Dave Hickey remarks in the introduction to the catalogue of the Werner show, even the master transgressor Marcel Duchamp deemed his dear friend Picabia insufficiently dignified. Picabia was an independently rich Parisian who tore through painting with the passionate absorption with which he tore through cars, yachts, and, at a more modest clip, women (two wives, one longtime companion). The operative term is "passion." While uncorking such outrages as paintings that are based, interchangeably, on Renaissance religious art and on photographic soft-core porn, he provided no reassuring winks of irony. In a century of ideologies, he was purely unprincipled. He once said, "There's nothing modern about making love; however, it's what I like to do best."

He also said, "If you want to have clean ideas, change them as often as you change your shirts." By this measure, his painting, after the collapse of the Dada movement, availed itself of a Gatsby-size wardrobe—sometimes on a single





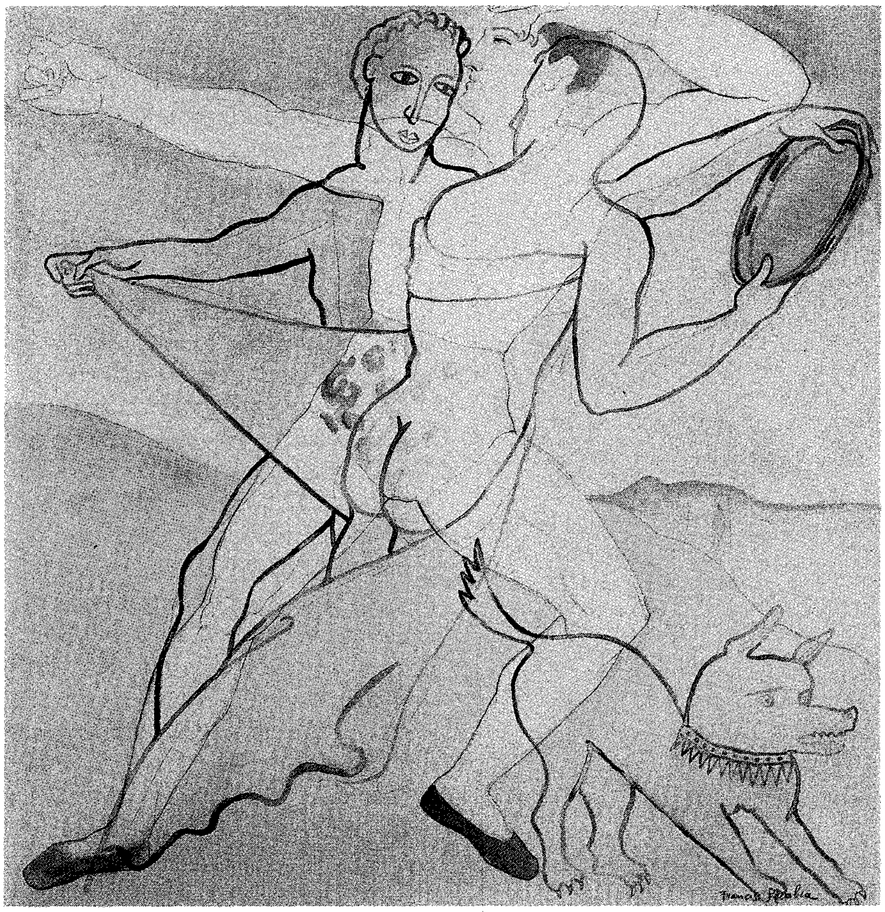


From left, Warhol's "Liz as Cleopatra" (1962), "Mint Marilyn" (1962), and "Round Gold Jackie" (1964); at right, Picabia's "Les Acrobates" (1926).

canvas. Classical drawing on Arcadian themes, grotesque totemic forms, abstract ornamentation, and passages of rugged realism mingle in his work of the nineteen-twenties and thirties. It's as if he couldn't bear to postpone anything that he wished to visualize. In the interest of having everything at once, he developed his most influential trope, overlaying line-drawn images on other images and on fully painted grounds. Nerve-rackingly lugubrious colors, featuring pale oranges and sickly greens, seize one's attention with the intensity of fever dreams. In a small masterpiece of demonic charm, "Portrait of Kiki" (circa 1938-40), a crudely rendered demimondaine in fur and a perky hat gazes out insouciantly through black lines that suggest a spider or cracked glass. This dark, crusty, clenched picture seems to demand something of the viewer—some squalid confession, perhaps—but it offers no clue about what it might be. I think I know Picabia's secret. It is that all his art addresses only one viewer—Picabia himself—whose mental space we rent for the price of our contemplation.

What is ugly in these paintings is what's normally ugly in a great deal of revered modern art—aggressively denatured color, coarsely worked textures, distorted figurative forms—only here the ugliness occurs unaccompanied by the usual alibi of high seriousness. This is modernism for the hell of it. It's as if Cubism—not to mention Surrealism, wacky doodles, and Sunday-painterish simpering nudes—were just another cool idea for rainy-day fun. Picabia's overlay technique enables him to accumulate a wealth of pictorial matter in depth, while retaining the material flatness of avant-garde pictorial form. But there is never a sense that this aesthetic rigor obeys any ethical imperative. You can see why his later work has been stoutly excluded from standard art histories. Picabia stands in relation to the gravitas of modern art as Groucho Marx did to Margaret Dumont.

When Warhol burst upon the world, in the early sixties, he was immediately taken to be a decadent mocker of high-cultural traditions. This was an honest mistake, occasioned by the artist's uses of mass-cult photographic imagery and the lowly technique of silk-screening. Actually, in his adoration of spectacular and, more often than not,



OPPOSITE: LEFT, AND BOTTOM RIGHT, COLLECTION OF JANE B. HOLZER; TOP RIGHT, COLLECTION OF JASPER JOHNS; THIS PAGE: COURTESY MICHAEL WERNER GALLERY

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tragic celebrities, Warhol drew reverently on several aesthetic resources of modern art; for example, he gave color a determining role à la Matisse, and he had an understanding of scale learned from Abstract Expressionism. The bonfire glamour of Marilyn Monroe, the desperate beauty of Elizabeth Taylor, and the vulnerable nobility of Jackie Kennedy were, for him, epiphanies of a new democratic religion in which certain people are mysteriously singled out to soar and suffer for us all. The pictures at C&M Arts are crucifixions, in a way, for the age of mechanical reproduction: essences of love and death, pressed into wafers of sheer appearance. Critics at the time drove themselves crazy trying to adduce an ironic attitude in Warhol's enterprise. They imposed veils of cynical suspicion on works that, when you step right up and look at them, are nakedly beautiful, unstinting, and grand. The number of smart people who have outsmarted themselves while presuming to explain Warhol would overflow a stadium.

Hickey writes that if, in the long-run test of continued vitality, Francis Picabia proves to have been right—that is, if modern art has no meaning weightier than an individual's appetite—"then a great many people, histories and institutions are wrong, and reams of institutional wisdom are little more than paper clouds." In a time that is wriggling free of twentieth-century pieties, Picabia's gargantuan freedom is something to reckon with. In Warhol's case, we should acknowledge just how right he got the big changes and, no less, the big continuities of life on a media-revolutionized planet. His best works of the early sixties flag the exact moment when it was no longer possible to regard mass culture as a sphere of kitsch, remote from the values of serious folk. Not only did he wed tabloid iconology to advanced painting; he also put painting in touch with the primitive majesty of things that are true for everybody everywhere at all times. His Marilyn isn't a burlesque Sphinx. She is the *echt* Sphinx, back in power—garish and icy cold. Warhol's great moment was brief. Caught in the feedback of his own influence, he declined rapidly as an artist. But his peak performance stands higher and higher, while everything that once seemed to contest it falls away. ◆

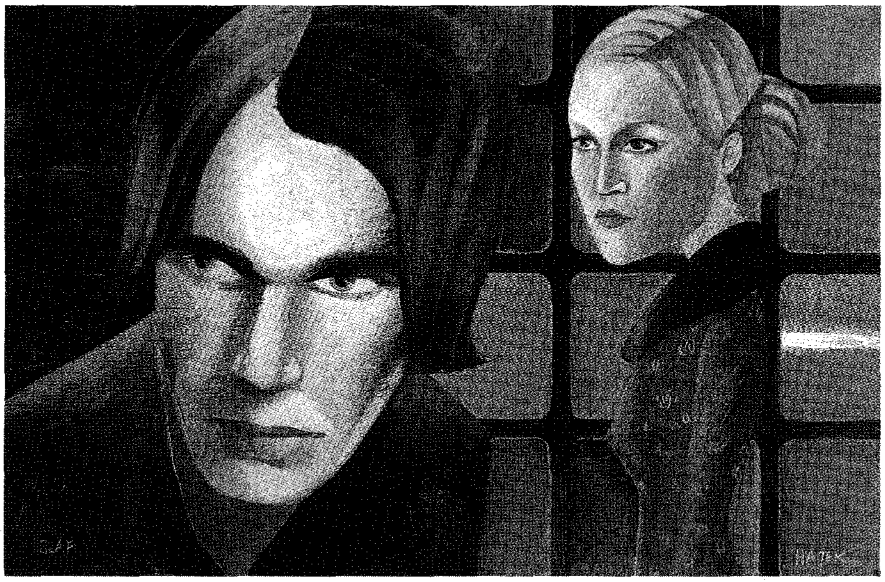
THE CURRENT CINEMA

FLESH AND BLOOD

Hamlet in Manhattan, confused in Florence, and action underwater.

BY DAVID DENBY

The black towers of Times Square, fretted with neon, tessellated with ledges, balconies, and catwalks, make a sinister and eloquent setting for the power struggles within the Denmark Corporation in the new modern-dress "Hamlet." In general, I loathe anyone's mucking about with the classics—"The Bacchae" staged in a Turkish colored-glass factory, Oedipus as a visually impaired hockey coach, etc.—but I was at first charmed and then, to my amazement, gripped by Michael Almereyda's restaging of the play. It's true that this Hamlet (Ethan Hawke), a bedraggled slacker in a knit cap, recites "To be or not to be" in a video store and washes Polonius's blood-soaked clothes in a laundromat. (The movie is very downtown in its resentments and occasional squalor.) But Almereyda's "Hamlet" is decidedly not a travesty. A young veteran of the New York independent scene, Almereyda has produced a ripely melancholy version of the play, and many of the translations into contemporaneity strike me as oddly right—Ophelia (Julia Stiles) as a tensely neurotic Manhattan girl with a weakness for fountains and pools, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a couple of slovenly screwups presuming on Hamlet's disarray. Almereyda has abbreviated the text, and it has lost the players, a great deal of wit, and some extraordinary metaphysical speculation; but it has gained fresh dimensions, too.



Ethan Hawke and Julia Stiles in Michael Almereyda's "Hamlet."

OLAF HAJEK

When we first encounter Hamlet, we see his image in a black-and-white video as he murmurs his dismay to himself. "To be or not to be," before its startling resetting in a video store, is also seen, in preliminary form, as a video. Hamlet, apparently, is keeping some kind of visual journal into which he spills his most private thoughts. The media outlets proliferate as vigorously as the play's metaphors of rottenness: the ghost of Hamlet's father (Sam Shepard) is first spotted on a surveillance camera, and Ophelia, miserably setting Hamlet up at Polonius's request, wears a wire to a meeting with him. All this, I think, is perfectly legitimate. Much of Shakespeare's stage action is devoted to spying, overhearing, interpreting, playacting; Almereyda has made representations, true and false,

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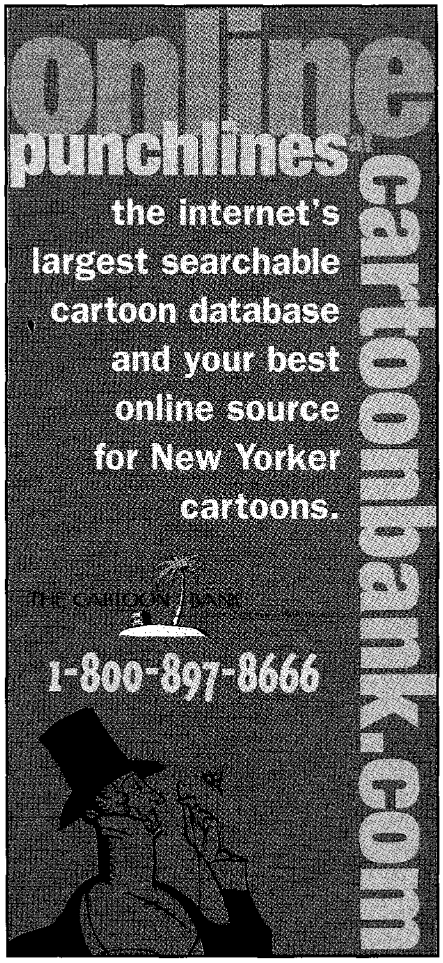
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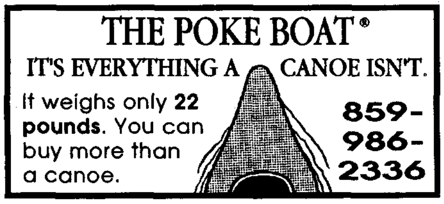
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not just a major but the central element in the play. Hamlet catches the conscience of the king with a nasty animated video that he devises with Horatio.

The movie is awash in replicated images, which produce an enormous sadness: Hamlet knows well enough that he's narcissistic and self-absorbed, but what can he do? He needs to convince himself that he exists. Powerful, self-assured people are flourishing all around him. His mother, Gertrude (Diane Venora), dotes on Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan), the Denmark Corporation's jolly, impervious new C.E.O. Venora, whose flesh and beautiful dark eyes are eroticized by John De Borman's cinematography, can't keep her hands off MacLachlan; she's the most obviously happy woman in recent movies. Polonius (Bill Murray), a bureaucratic adviser in a business suit, is plump with self-satisfaction; Laertes (Liev Schreiber) has his righteous passions. By contrast, Ethan Hawke keeps his voice low; he's an adolescent and mopey Hamlet, private, pale, and preoccupied, inconceivable as a leader. It is an interpretation without romance or nobility, but it doesn't cross the border into self-pity. We understand Hamlet's funk as a very specific kind of contemporary misery: the only way that Hamlet can "be" is by reproducing himself in images, yet to be always watched, or always watching, is sheer anguish. "Hamlet" could be taken as a confession of a filmmaker's despair.

This is a movie about a depressed Hamlet, though the adaptation itself has a mischievous and stinging intelligence, and its own kind of sullen beauty. Carter Burwell's menacing neo-electronic music floats over the flat surfaces and bland handsomeness of the high-rise apartments and offices, which are both glamorous and unyielding in their lack of comfort. The movie is visually both brilliant and dark, featuring the strong blacks of the power city at night, and strong reds, too, drawn from the roses associated with Gertrude's sexual awakening and from the blood-soaked dénouement, which, staged along an open terrace high above the streets, mixes sword and gunplay. This "Hamlet" may be closer to inspired collage than to poetic drama, but it releases the old fable with its emotional force intact. The adolescent Hamlet, struggling to exist, seems as palpable and fleshy as the others only in death.

"Up at the Villa," the new film by Philip and Belinda Haas ("Angels and Insects"), plays as smoothly as vintage wine, but the material, adapted from a Somerset Maugham novella, substitutes worldliness for drama, and the Haases seem not to realize that there might be something wrong with that. They treat Maugham's skillfully wrought kitsch about aristocrats and playboys as if it were sombre moral exploration; they take the fun out of it without achieving anything serious. "Up at the Villa" is about a beautiful young English widow, Mary Panton (Kristin Scott Thomas), who is caught between sensuality and security. Visiting the Anglo-American expatriate community in Florence, in 1938, Mary has to choose among three lovers: a buttoned-up-tight British aristocrat and diplomat (James Fox) who is much older than she is; a young and penniless Austrian refugee (Jeremy Davies) who is given to self-dramatizing poses; and an American playboy (Sean Penn) who has a taste for danger and who truly loves her. Should our heroine choose comfort or excitement? When she acts willfully, can she redeem herself? These are questions that require wit and temperament, not glum refinement. "Up at the Villa" was shot mainly at night, in a handsome and lavishly furnished estate outside Siena (doubling for Florence's hills), and only those moviegoers who can content themselves with cypresses waving in the breeze and tapestries and carved wood will think they are looking at a real movie.

Anne Bancroft shows up as a cynical American woman married to some fabulously wealthy Italian prince, but her role is poorly written—it's facetious rather than funny. Despite Bancroft's sallies, much of "Up at the Villa" is overdeliberate and humorless. The Haases, who have

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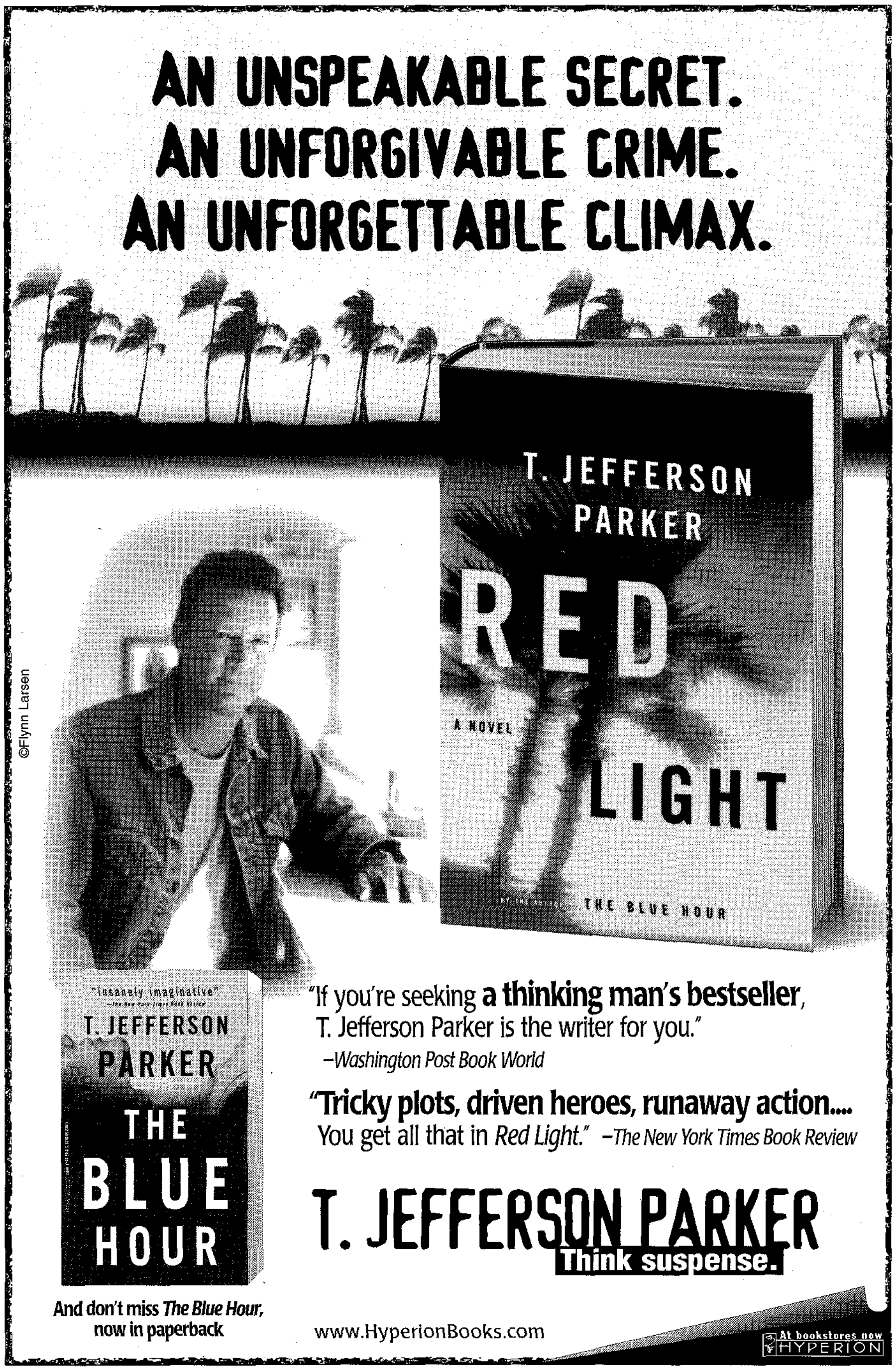
worked together on documentaries as well as on features, are really much too straight for this kind of thing. They induce Sean Penn to give a relaxed and quiet performance—but so quiet that he seems almost to be engaged in an acting-class exercise ("Do a suave William Powell number in a tuxedo"). Penn and Kristin Scott Thomas don't go together—the badinage between them is mild and literal. By temperament, Scott Thomas offers the very opposite of melodrama; she's crisp and fine-boned, and classily self-contained, but a role like this requires an actress with a touch of romantic grandeur. After all, we don't always want modesty and intelligence; sometimes we want arrogance and folly. The Haases are trying to make a popular movie without developing the ingredients that make movies popular.

Can't anyone shoot an action sequence anymore? In "Gladiator," Ridley Scott thrusts us so close to the combat that all we see is a lot of whirling and thrashing, a sword thrust here and there, a spurt of blood, a limb severed. There's hardly a scene that is cleanly and coherently staged in open space. The violence comes mainly from the editing, in the cheapening use of montage. We see this sort of flamboyant mess all the time in the movies, but almost no one complains—perhaps because we have become so accustomed to spatially incoherent movement in commercials and on MTV that it now looks normal. Jonathan Mostow is one of the few directors who care about such things. In "Breakdown," his 1997 thriller starring Kurt Russell, Mostow established, for the first hour at least, a moment-to-moment continuity of menacing physical action that gained most of its effectiveness—its pleasure—from our being able to see how one person impinged on another. And in his new movie, the Second World War drama "U-571," Mostow stages a scene, at night, with men in rafts caught between two submarines, that is quite thrilling. The movie is composed of action tropes from old pictures—the terror of depth charges, the testing of a young officer (Matthew McConaughey)—but, scene by scene, "U-571" is brought off with conviction and skill. Even if we know how things are going to turn out, we are pulled as taut as a bowstring by people who respect us enough not to tease us with fakery. ♦



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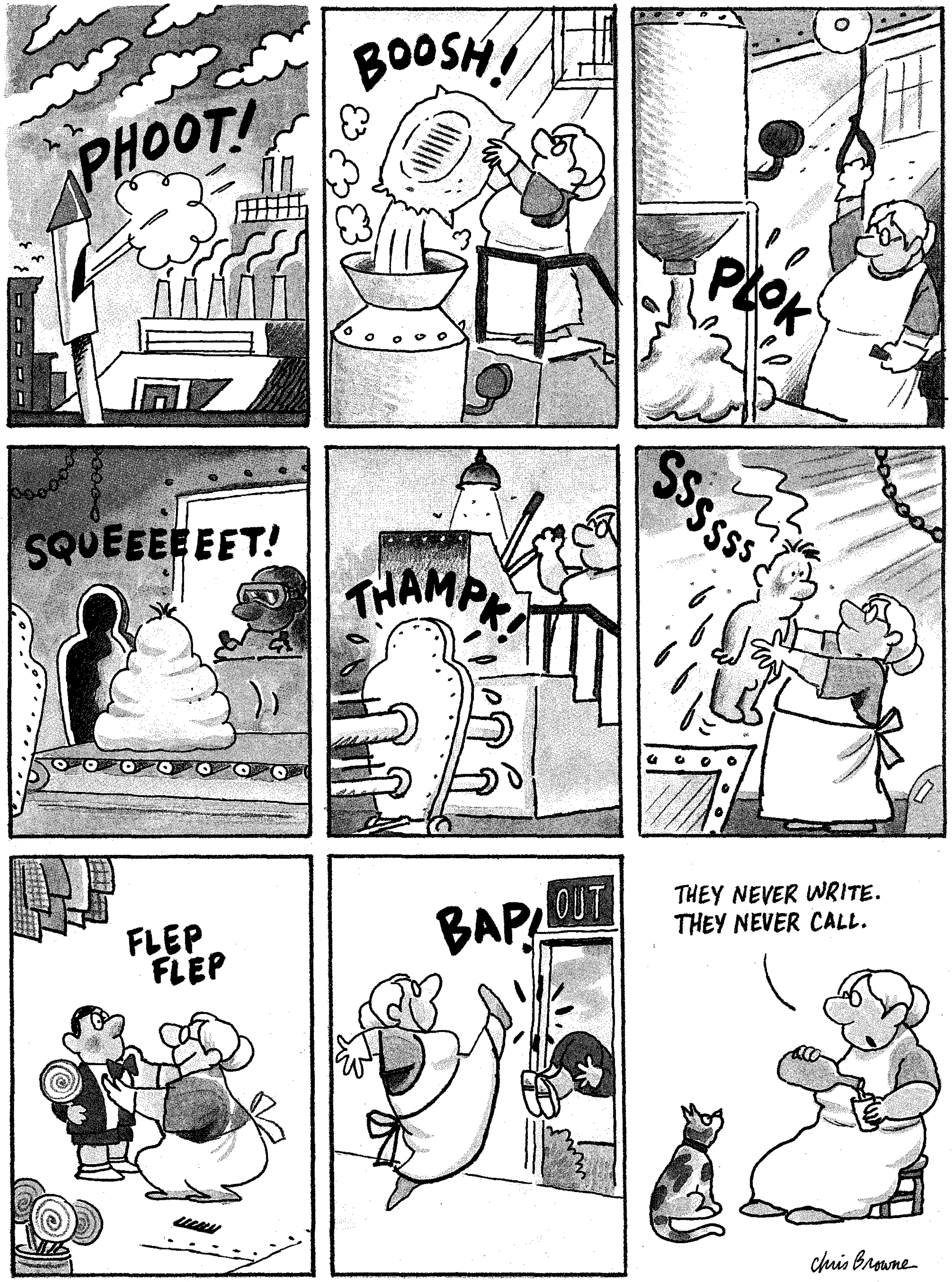
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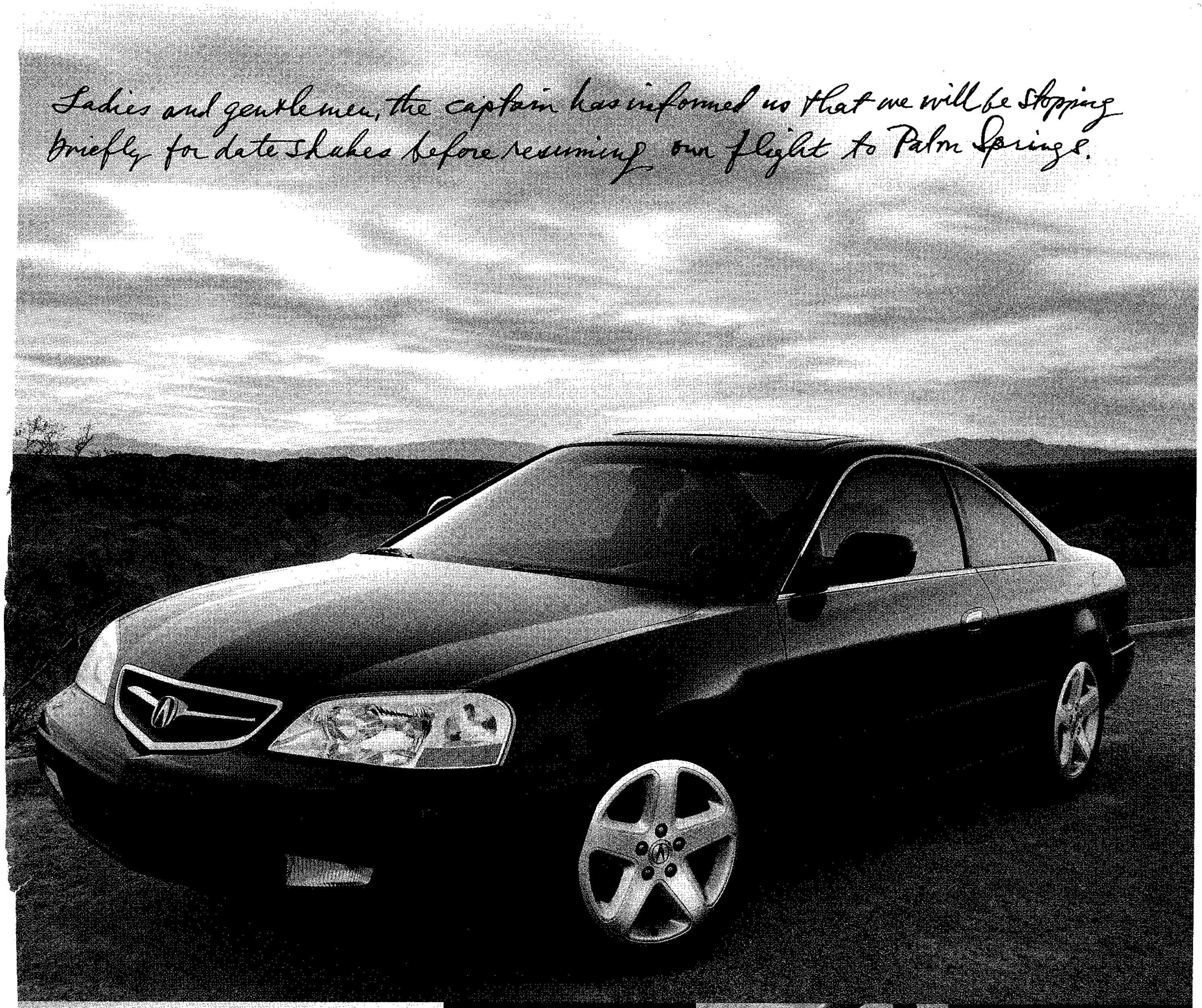
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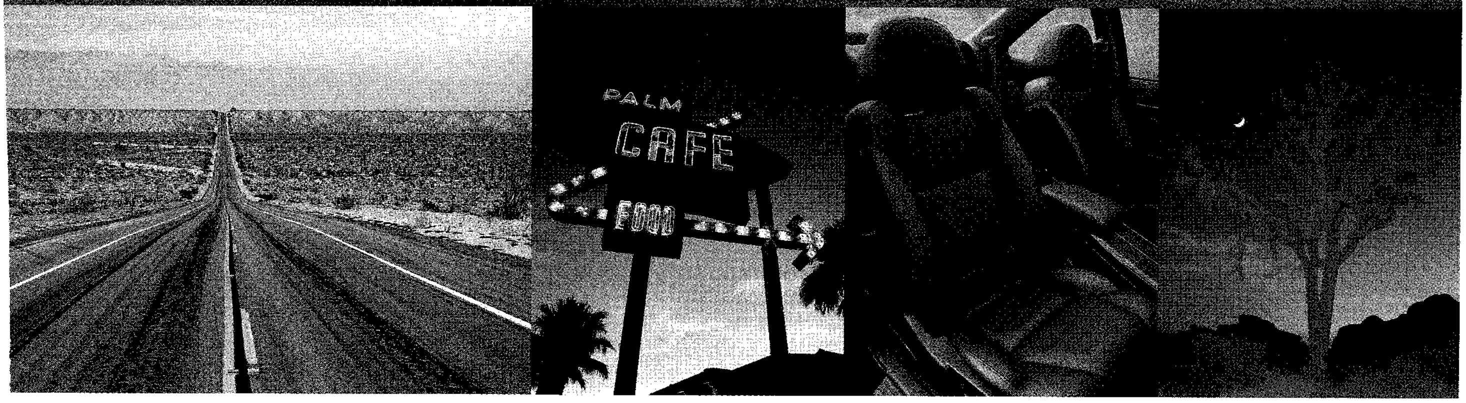
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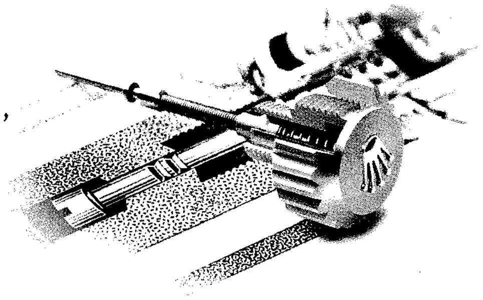

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